

最強の剣舞姫

精霊使いの剣舞

志瑞祐

Illustration
桜はんぺん

MF文庫



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精霊使いの剣舞7
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精霊使いの剣舞7 ブレイドダンス 最強の剣舞姫

ネペンテス・ロアとの死闘から一夜明け、ひとときの休息をとるカミトたち。だが、〈最強の剣舞姫〉レン・アッシュベルの剣技を使ったことで、カミトはクリアたちからある疑惑を向けられてしまう。「あいつなにか隠してる気がするのよね、レン・アッシュベルのことで」「……確かめてみるか？」そんな中〈チーム・スカーレット〉は、クイナ帝国代表〈スーシン・チーム・インフェルノ〉からの宣戦布告を受ける。だが、決闘に向かう両チームに、アルファス教国の王女にして〈煉獄の使徒〉副将、魔精霊使いシェーラ・カーンの魔の手が迫り……。真実を騙る偽りと、偽りを装う真実。少女たちの憧憬に絡みつく蒼い蛇を、真の最強は断ち切れるのか——？ エレメンタル・ファンタジー第7弾！

最強の剣舞姫

精霊使いの

剣舞

グレイドダンス

志瑞祐

Illustration
桜はんぺん



「では、カミトはどちらが
好きなのですか？」

「え？」

無表情に訊いてくるエストに、
カミトは訊き返した。

「はい。叩く側と叩かれる側……
どちらにも、カミトの望むままに」

?

エスト

Kazuhaya Kamito
カゼハヤ・カミト



Fianna Ray Ordesia
フィアナ・レイ・オルデシア

「……んっ、動いちゃ、
だめ……ちゅっ……」

「ま、まま、まて！
こんなところ、
誰かに見られたら——」



「やんっ……あっ……
み、水の精霊さんが、服の中につ……!」
「なっ!？」

カミトは目を見開いた。

ふよふよしたゼリーのような水精霊が、リンスレットの腕を這い、制服の下にもぐりこもうとしているのだ。

Rinset Lauren Frost
リンスレット・ローレンフロスト

精霊使いの 剣舞

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Prologue

Part 1

--The streets were plunged into a sea of flames.

This was a tiny rural town on the borders of the Ordesia Empire.

This was not the result of war -- Destruction had descended without warning.

On that day, a rain of fire fell from the sky.

This was the punishment cast upon the townsfolk who had been negligent in their offerings to «Volcanicus», the Fire Elemental Lord.

Raging flames incinerated homes and turned the surrounding farmland into scorched earth instantly.

The people fled for their lives from the swirling flames and black smoke, desperately praying for absolution.

They had not intentionally neglected their offerings for the Elemental Lord. Only because they had been met with a rare drought, the crops used for offerings had failed to harvest.

Despite the dance performances of beautiful princess maidens together with the total offering of all stored grain originally meant for winter consumption, the Elemental Lord's wrath could not be placated.

Before the anger of the great Elemental Lord, humans were completely powerless. All people could do was bow their head and gnash their teeth, desperately enduring and waiting for the disaster to pass.

"--Great Elemental Lord, we beseech you to calm your wrath."

High ranking princess maidens serving at the «Divine Ritual Institute» had been offering prayers at the sanctuary's Great Shrine for three days straight to appease the Elemental Lord's anger.

And the one chosen to lead them was the newly appointed Fire Queen, a girl only fifteen years old.

While the other princess maidens rested in shifts, she alone focused all her efforts on sustaining the prayer with neither rest nor sleep.

At the same time, the imagery of the people devoured by the crimson flames was branded deeply in her red eyes.

The rain of destruction finally halted on the morning of the fourth day.

Streets that had been bustling mere days earlier were now turned into a wasteland of scorched earth.

Homes were all incinerated, leaving nothing behind but ashen gray despair.

The peaceful everyday life the townsfolk had worked hard to maintain was transformed into ash in but an instant.

And after all had ended--

"The merciful Elemental Lord has heard our prayers."

The elderly shrine leader spoke to comfort the prostrated Queen.

However, the young Queen covered her ears and shook her head.

I wasn't able to do anything. I failed to protect them -- that was what she thought to herself.

"Why... Why did the Elemental Lord do such a thing to innocent citizens..."

"Rubia-sama, the will of the Elemental Lords cannot be understood by mortal humans. All we can do is pray for forgiveness. Rubia-sama, you have already done spectacularly."

In actual fact, amongst the people of the destroyed town, there was no one who had a single complaint. Having had all their possessions taken away by a tyrannical and unreasonable disaster, the townsfolk felt nothing but sincere gratitude towards the Queen who had placated the Elemental Lord's wrath.

--Nevertheless, such gratitude stabbed into girl's heart and soul, more painfully than any vicious curse.

Part 2

(--This is virtually like that time in the past.)

The girl's awareness was brought back to the present from her reminiscing.

Swirling crimson flames roared as they incinerated the trees in the forest. Muir Alenstarl was employing the military spirit «Garuda» whose hellfire was incinerating a team's «stronghold».

The masked girl silently gazed as the forest was devoured by the raging burning fires before her eyes.

With this, four teams had been eliminated by «Team Inferno». Adding those annihilated by Nepenthes Lore and Restia by themselves, seven teams were gone. In other words, out of all the teams participating in the current «Blade Dance» festival, almost one third of them had already been eliminated by «Team Inferno».

The «Magic Stones» obtained were more than enough to ensure advancement to the finals.

However, this was completely inconsequential to the girl.

(...My goal is not victory in the «Blade Dance» festival.)

Looking up at the dawn sky, she whispered.

"The Demon King's successor, Ren Ashbell -- we must properly prepare a sixth Queen to serve him."

Several hours earlier, Restia had taken Nepenthes Lore without permission to induce Kazehaya Kamito's awakening. But apparently, her plan ended in failure.

However, the darkness spirit's betrayal was expected. Even though the loss of Nepenthes Lore was a miscalculation, the «Plan» was not affected in any major way.

(From the very start, I never had any intention of handing to that darkness spirit control over the Demon King who is about to awaken.)

There were only two potential candidates. The decision was about to reach the final stage.

"What bonds of destiny. No matter which one, both of them have such deep connections to my past."

In particular, there was that particular girl with such a rare disposition to become «Queen».

From the inner pocket of her military uniform, the masked girl took out a pendant on a silver chain.

The inlaid ruby -- a spirit crystal which sealed memories, displayed the figure of a young girl in a dress.

Her hair tied into two fiery bunches. Crystal clear ruby-like eyes.

This was the frail and vulnerable girl who had always hid behind her elder sister and parents.

The masked girl originally thought that they would never meet again since that particular day, four years ago--

"Oh my, looks like Ren Ashbell-sama still misses that young lady greatly."

Hearing the voice from behind, the masked girl swiftly closed the pendant in her hand.

Turning around, she found the one standing there to be--

The girl whose image was displayed just an instant earlier in the pendant.

But instead of a dress, she was now wearing the uniform of Areishia Spirit Academy.

Neither was she in her childhood appearance. Instead, this was her after years of growth.

"How truly tasteless, witch. Or are you trying to mock me?"

The eyes behind the mask glared coldly at the one imitating Claire Rouge's form.

Although her voice remained calm, the fallen leaves by her feet were already smoking as if being burned by a fire.

"Ufufu, how rare to see you display such emotion. Could this girl be the candidate for the sixth Queen required by your «Plan»?"

"--None of your concern. Be gone."

Instantly, her fingertips released swift and ferocious flames.

Enveloped in crimson flames, the image of Claire Rouge vanished like a mirage.

"So scary. It's like even treading on your shadow is forbidden."

The air shook and immediately at the spot where Claire had disappeared--

A beautiful girl appeared with a mocking smile.

Her shoulder length hair was a striking and vibrant blue. Excessively beautiful and reminiscent of snakes bearing deadly venom -- that was the impression one received from that sort of blue.

Dressed in an outfit in the style of an erotic dancer, she had a thin veil covering her mouth.

She was the elementalist -- Sjora Kahn.

The princess of the Alphas Theocracy, and at the same time, the second-in-command of «Team Inferno».

"I hope you have not forgotten. That the identity prepared for you to participate in the «Blade Dance» as well as the military spirits at your disposal are all provided by my home country?"

"In exchange, I promised to obtain victory."

"Of course there would be no problem if that happened. However, you seem to be hiding things from us, your collaborators, secretly plotting something."

"What are you trying to insinuate?"

"Hey, are you really that «Strongest Blade Dancer»?"

Sjora Kahn scoffed.

"If you have any doubts about my power, would you like a taste right now, witch?"

Instantly, all vegetation at her feet was burnt to ash. Neither through chanting spirit magic nor summoning a contracted spirit, but simply from her released will, flames were produced.

"Fufu, just kidding. I still value my own life... Oh my?"

Suddenly, the witch's eyebrow jumped.

"What is it?"

"Looks like while I was out, contemptible rats have scurried inside."

Sjora licked her lips with delight. She was the one who constructed «Team Inferno»'s stronghold. Furthermore, rather than a defensive stronghold, it was a nest prepared for hunting foolish prey.

"...Ufufu, looks like I'll be able to have some fun."

The witch's lips displayed a smile of delight. She loved toying with prey that had fallen into a trap. As her red eyes flashed with glittering brilliance, Sjora disappeared into the depths of the forest.

(...To what extent is the Alphas Theocracy's «Snake» aware of the «Plan»?)

Sjora Kahn's actions were difficult to predict. In consideration of the «Plan», perhaps she should be eliminated immediately.

(...No, there is still value in using the Alphas. Eliminating the witch right now would not be wise.)

Quietly, the masked girl shook her head as she gazed up at the sky where sparks flew and scattered, whispering.

"Well then, the princess maiden suited to the position of «Darkness Queen», which one would it be?"

Chapter 1 - Declaration of War

Part 1

It was the fourth morning during the main battle of the «Blade Dance» festival -- the «Tempest».

"Uwah... Ah..."

Lying on the futon in the tent, Kamito suppressed yet another yawn for who knew how many times already.

The morning after the intense battle against Nepenthes Lore, the whole team had just saw off the departure of Milla Bassett, the leader of the «Rupture Division» who had resolved herself to forfeit the event.

By the fourth day of the main battle, every team had already built their «strongholds», and the blade dance was heating up. This was not supposed to be a time of rest, but having undergone the battle against Nepenthes Lore last night, Team Scarlet's members were all utterly exhausted.

Hence, they all decided to stay and defend the «stronghold» for a day in order to obtain sufficient rest.

(But this is unbearable...)

Kamito groaned as he turned on the bedding.

Despite his body's exhaustion and the sleepiness he felt, he simply could not fall asleep.

The reason was due to the memories Kamito glimpsed during the instant when Restia disappeared.

The memories of that day, sealed somewhere deep in his mind.

As Ren Ashbell, the strongest blade dancer, Kamito had emerged victorious from the «Blade Dance» three years ago.

Towards the young Kamito, Restia had declared her «Wish»--

'I hope you can assassinate them. The five Elemental Lords.'

(Assassinate Elemental Lords... What on earth did that mean?)

Lording over all elementals, ruling the elements that comprised the world -- they were the «Five Great Elemental Lords».

They were not simply particularly powerful elementals. --If one had to describe it, this world could be considered their creation.

(Have me... Assassinate them?)

Why -- No, before considering why, this was simply beyond a human's ability.

What happened in the end to the «Wish» three years ago, Kamito had virtually no recollection.

What he could still remember was only the instant when that hateful and black «Wish» devoured her.

He was struck with an intense headache. Every time he tried to dig into his memories, this intense dizziness would occur.

It almost felt like the domain storing the memories had been uprooted whole.

(...That time, I failed to catch her hand.)

Kamito tightly clenched his leather gloved left hand. Mere hours ago, before she disappeared, the sensation of embracing her in his arms still lingered on his fingertips.

She had not been exterminated from this world. Simply exhausted in power, unable to manifest for now. The elemental seal branded on the back of his left hand was proof of that.

--At this time.

"...Hmm?"

Suddenly, Kamito noticed a sense of dissonance near his lower body.

Something seemed to be crawling around, restless around his waist. The cold soft touch felt a bit like the scales of a reptile.

(...A wild snake?)

Surprised, Kamito frowned and lifted the blanket from the bed.

"...E-Est!?"

The girl who slipped beneath his blanket was the sword elemental.

Her silver-white hair shone lustrously under the sunlight. Tender white skin that resembled the color of fresh milk.

Expressionlessly, she was gazing at Kamito with her mysterious violet eyes.

"Ah... Wait a minute, y-you, why are you dressed like that!?"

Kamito widened his eyes and shouted.

This was not her usual naked kneesocks look.

Est was currently wearing a tight-fitting erotic studded leather bondage suit in black.

The garter belt could be seen extending from beneath the leather miniskirt. Her bare feet were clad in black longboots.

Entwined several times around her right hand was a leather whip. In her left hand was a red candle.

Clad in this outfit, the cute little girl displayed even greater seductive charm than when fully nude.

"Kamito, is dressing like this really strange?"

Continuing her posture of riding on Kamito's abdomen, Est asked expressionlessly.

"No, rather than strange, let's just say the meaning is not... Hot, this is burning hot!"

Who knew when it had been lit, but the melting candle wax was dripping onto Kamito's upper body.

"Do you feel happy, Kamito?"

"No, who the heck would feel happy!? This burns, that's all!"

Kamito frantically blew out the flame on the candle.

Est inclined her head in puzzlement.

"...Not happy?"

"I'm not interested in something like this! By the way, who taught you this?"

"...How regrettable. This book says that people feel happy when wax is dripped on them."

Est took out a book from somewhere. Although Kamito was not very knowledgeable about novels, he could tell it was a love novel aimed at teenagers.

Casually flipping through the pages, he found beautiful illustrations throughout.

On first glance, there was nothing extraordinary about it, no different from a normal novel--

"...Wha!"

On one of the final pages, Kamito could not help but voice his surprise.

Probably the section most visited by the owner, this page was marked by a fold.

It was a scene where an elegant high-class lady was being punished by the butler working in the household.

The illustration depicted the high-class lady's ecstatic expression as wax was dripped onto her bare skin.

"E-Est, this kind of book is not appropriate for you! It's too early for you, Est!"

Kamito instantly closed the book with a smack... Although Est was an elemental who had already lived for centuries, that was not where the issue lay.

"Where did you find this book?"

"Claire keeps it under her pillow."

"T-That girl, I can't believe she's reading this kind of book when she is a lady of nobility..."

Kamito's face convulsed as he grumbled quietly.

"So, which side does Kamito prefer?"

"Huh?"

Kamito answered Est's expressionless query with a question.

"Yes. To whip or be whipped... Whichever you choose, Kamito, all shall be according to your will."

"...!?"

Kamito could not help but gasp.

Instantly, his heart raced as he imagined Est wielding a leather whip tensely, restrained in a bondage suit, with numerous whip marks on her adorable rear end.

(...Damn me, what am I thinking about!?)

Kamito shook his head violently.

Whipping Est or anything like that... I can't possibly do that.

"I'd rather suffer a hundredfold than let Est be treated that way."

This forceful declaration prompted Est to nod.

"Yes, Kamito. So this means you prefer to be whipped, Kamito?"

"Eh? No that's not right, you're mistaken... Ouch!"

Smack smack!

Est remained expressionless as she began to whip Kamito's upper body.

"E-Est, what are you doing!?"

"Kamito, do you feel happy?"

Smack smack!

"Like I said, I don't have that kind of unusual interest!"

"In other words... Unhappy?"

Est tilted her head in puzzlement.

"A-Ahhh... Perhaps there exist people in this world who might be happy, but I'm not one of them."

Kamito shook his head as he rubbed his painful skin.

Hearing his words, Est slumped her shoulders as if a bit disheartened.

"Sorry, Kamito. Does it hurt?"

"Ah, don't worry about it... Umm, I appreciate your well-intentions, Est, but there is no need to put them into action."

"Huah..."

Kamito gently caressed Est's head as she inquired with worry.

After all, Est had come up with this less than ideal plan after much thought, for the sake of making Kamito happy. Reprimanding her would be quite pitiful.

"By the way, where did you get this equipment?"

"Hmm, from amongst Fianna's ritual equipment."

"...I see. So the other culprit is Her Highness the imperial princess."

Skilled in ritual magic, Fianna had brought to the grounds a large amount of equipment for festival rites and rituals. Amongst them included animal ears and exotic foreign clothes with bold high slits etc. Various ritual attires of unknown purposes were fully stocked in all shapes and sizes.

(...I can understand the candle, but aren't the leather whip and bondage suit way too weird?)

...That said, Kamito was completely uninitiated in the domain of ritual magic and had no basis to comment.

At this moment, the curtain draping over the tent's entrance was vigorously thrown open.

"...Kamito-kun, what on earth is going on!?"

"Fianna?"

A beautiful girl with gorgeous waist-length black hair had made her appearance.

Fianna Ray Ordesia, Her Highness the imperial princess.

Covering her mouth, her dusk-colored eyes were staring wide open.

Her gaze was directed towards the bondage suited girl riding on Kamito.

"...Kamito-kun?"

"Y-You've misunderstood, this is, umm..."

Kamito frantically tried to diffuse the misunderstanding, but—

"...Hmph, to think Kamito-kun actually had a thing for this."

Fianna was murmuring as if coming to a realization, cheeks blushing slightly.

"...In that case, you should have said so earlier."

"Eh?"

"I-It's not a problem! Even if Kamito-kun has such unusual tastes, I will accommodate you fully! Besides, it's not like I'm not interested either..."

Shyly covering her increasingly reddened face, the imperial princess turned around and fled.

"Fianna, w-wait!"

...It would be troublesome if this misunderstood scene was not cleared up. Transferring Est who was riding his body to the bed, Kamito frantically got up, planning to chase after Fianna. But just as he was about to exit the tent—

"Hey Kamito, my book's gone missing... Wah!"

Rushing without paying attention, he almost collided with the girl who was entering the tent.

The one arriving was the red twintailed beautiful girl with blazing eyes of ruby.

"C-Claire!?"

"Kamito... Seriously, what are you doing in such a panic..."

Claire frowned in surprise--

...Then turned her gaze towards the depths of the tent.

Over there was Est's crouching figure, dressed immodestly.

"Y-Y-You even made your contracted spirit d-dress, d-dress like that...?"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

"W-Wait a second, that's all because of your b--"

"Excuses are futile. You great pervert, prepare to turn into charcoal!"

Completely mercilessly, Claire summoned Flametongue.

Part 2

...Several minutes later.

"Y-You are really the worst, the utter w-worst, w-worst kind of pervert!"

As Claire smacked her whip against the ground, Kamito knelt before her.

Seeing him in this disgraceful state, no one could possibly believe he was once the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Asbell, whom girls all over the continent idolized.

"I can't believe you made Est wear th-that indecent outfit..."

Simply recalling the image was enough to make her blush... What a pure and innocent young lady.

"No wait, speaking of which, the whole reason Est dressed like that was because of your book, right?"

Kamito narrowed his eyes and questioned in return. Instantly, Claire's expression froze completely.

"...Say, Kamito."

"Hmm?"

"Could it be possible, did you actually see the contents of the book?"

"No, I didn't read it but simply flipped through it."

"I-Is that so... Then it's fine."

Claire breathed a sigh of relief.

(...Hoho, I see.)

Kamito gloated in his mind... This was perhaps a chance for a counterattack.

"Oh well, I did glance at that one folded page."

"...Eh!?"

"It was really shocking. To think that a daughter of the prestigious Elstein family would read that kind of shameless book."

"...!?"

Claire's face instantly became bright red.

"I-It's not some kind of shameless book, okay! It's a noble love story!"

"I don't see it at all... By the way, didn't you want to experience the same thing that happened to the heroine?"

"N-No, th-that, th-that kind of thing is impossible, you pervert...!"

Claire frantically denied the suggestion. However, her tone of voice sounded rather weak and unconvincing.

"You're actually the pervert, right, Claire? If other people in the Academy found out you were reading that kind of book, how do you think they'd react?"

"T-That kind of thing... N-No, I am not some kind of pervert..."

Claire gazed at Kamito with tears in her eyes.

(...Crap, I think I went too far.)

Kamito scratched his head, a little apologetic.

...Every time he was talking to Claire, somehow he always felt the urge to tease her.

"What happened here? What's with all the noise?"

Rinslet entered at this time, returning from the path in the woods.

Her emerald eyes flashed brightly. Her rose-colored lips invited tender affection.

Bathed beneath the sunlight, her platinum blonde hair glittered with brilliant luster.

Spotting Kamito sitting formally in kneeling posture, she raised her eyebrows and frowned.

"Claire, are you punishing people again? Kamito-san is such a poor dear."

Despite her haughty attitude which easily caused misunderstandings, Rinslet was in actual fact a very kind-hearted young lady.

"B-Because Kamito..."

"Kamito-san, you should stop serving this violent master. Come and be my slave instead. If you do that, I will personally prepare food for you every day."

Blushing slightly, Rinslet made her offer.

"...Hmm, even though it's strange for a master to be cooking personally for the slave, that doesn't sound so bad at all."

Kamito nodded as a joke. Rinslet's cooking skills were indisputable. If he were really treated to such delicious cuisine every day, oh how wonderful his days would be.

However--

"...W-Wait a minute, Kamito?"

Claire seemed frozen as if she had suffered some kind of shock.

...Making an expression like an abandoned kitten, she bit her lip hard.

Seeing her like that, Kamito shrugged.

"However..."

He stood up from the ground and placed his hand on her head.

"I already have a contract with Claire."

Contracted. I will become your contracted spirit -- That was how it went.

"Kamito..."

Claire instantly blushed as she stared at Kamito.

Then she averted her gaze as if embarrassed--

"T-That's right, Kamito is indeed my slave spirit. Furthermore, I-I have already given you my first time."

"Your first time?"

"W-What on earth is this!?"

Rinslet's voice shuddered.

(...Could it be, she meant that time?)

Kamito inclined his head in thought and finally remembered.

That was not long after he had met Claire, back when the military spirit had gone berserk in the academy town.

At the time, in order to motivate Kamito who was in a state of dejection after re-encountering Restia, Claire had kissed Kamito.

Surely she was blushing because she recalled what happened back then.

...Feeling a little embarrassed himself, Kamito also averted eye contact as he scratched his face.

"No fair, what is with you two!? It feels like I'm the only one left out!"

Pouting, Rinslet displayed anger on her face.

At this time, a sudden gust of wind blew by.

"Yah!" "Uwah!"

"...!?"

The two young ladies frantically pressed down on the hems of their skirts.



"K-Kamito, you must have seen it!"

"Kamito-san is such a pervert."

"No, it was unavoidable just now--"

"Hmm, Kamito, what sort of shameless act are you engaged in again?"

Just as Kamito shook his head repeatedly in protest, a shrill voice was heard from the air above.

Stern brown eyes. A ponytail swaying in the cyclone.

A storm gathering about her, the girl stared at Kamito as she landed on the ground.

The girl making her appearance was Ellis Fahrengart. The knight in armor.

"What's going on, Ellis? You're even using «Flight» magic."

Hearing Claire's surprised enquiry, Ellis coughed lightly.

"Ah, there's something urgent."

"...?"

Kamito and the other girls looked at each other in turn.

"Look at this. It was just delivered by a spirit familiar."

Saying that, Ellis handed on a scroll made from animal skin.

Releasing the buckle, they found words written in a squiggly snake-like script.

"...What foreign language is this?"

Kamito frowned. Even having undergone Restia's education and being able to decipher literature written in spirit language, Kamito was unfamiliar with foreign languages.

"Hmm, I can't read it either."

"Seriously, you guys are hopeless..."

Claire sighed with a surprised expression.

"This is a script widely used in oriental cultures. This should have been covered in the Academy's foundation courses, right?"

"...I-I'm not good at languages."

Ellis' ponytail dangled with dismay.

True to her reputation as a high achieving student, Claire read the contents of the letter fluently.

But after reading it, her expression became very solemn.

"What did it say?"

"...It's a declaration of war. And it's from the «Four Gods»."

"The «Four Gods»...!?"

Ellis gasped.

The «Four Gods» was a formidable team from the Quina Empire, a major country on the eastern part of the continent. Not only did the Quina Empire have a longer history than the Ordesia Empire, it had also won the «Blade Dance» a greater number of times.

Widely known amongst the participants of the competition was their topnotch team cooperation as well as the name of Shao Fu, the user of the divine beast spirit «White Tiger».

Disregarding «Team Inferno», this was a team that rivaled Dracunia's «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» and the Holy Kingdom of Lugia's «Sacred Spirit Knights». It was imperative to be wary of them.

"The «Four Gods» established their stronghold relatively close to here. After dominating all the surrounding teams, the only one remaining in the area seems to be ours."

"By declaration of war, they mean?"

"A direct confrontation at a location away from either side's stronghold."

Re-rolling the scroll, Claire shrugged.

The «Blade Dance» was not simply a combat festival that pitted competitors against one another in contests of martial strength. Instead, it was the stage for exalted elementalists to act as priestesses and make

blade dance offerings to the Five Great Elemental Lords. Consequently, when one team was intent on engaging in blade dance with another, they would send the recipient a letter that implied a declaration of war.

It was already the fourth day of the «Tempest» main event. Nearly all teams had already constructed secure strongholds. Even though blade dances in the opening stage were dominated by skirmishes and ambushes, now that the middlegame had started, teams were increasingly engaging in duels like this to break stalemates.

"Then what should we do?"

Kamito surveyed the girls' faces one after another.

Of course, there was the choice of ignoring this unilateral declaration of war, however—

After some consideration, Claire quietly spoke.

"I believe we should accept. If we cower at a time like this, it would tarnish the honor of Areishia Spirit Academy and Principal Greyworth."

"I agree with Claire."

"To dare challenge an exalted lady like me to battle, how bold!"

Just as expected, Team Scarlet's young ladies all seemed eager to battle.

Kamito had no objections. After all, only three days remained in the competition. This was a chance to take possession of the massive number of «Spirit Stones» collected by the «Four Gods».

"The time for the decisive duel is tomorrow morning. Ellis will send a messenger to bring our reply to the «Four Gods»--"

"Wait a minute."

Kamito suddenly interrupted.

"Why?"

"We haven't asked Fianna's opinion yet. Isn't this a bit inappropriate?"

"Indeed. Where is she currently?"

"Just now, I think she walked towards the forest..."

...Come to think of it, where the heck did she go? Kamito began to worry a bit.

Even within the forest's barrier, it was not absolutely safe. After the damage caused by Nepenthes Lore, the «stronghold»'s defenses were full of openings. It was possible for beasts or malevolent spirits to take advantage of the barrier's weaknesses to invade.

"Let's search briefly in the forest. Ellis can continue scouting the surrounding situation."

"Yes, acknowledged."

Ellis nodded.

"I will go search."

"Then I'll go as well."

"Rinslet, it's time for me to take your shift. You should go into the tent for a break."

"I-I'm fine!"

"It's important to rest according to the prescribed schedule. After the battle yesterday, you should be quite tired. Why don't you warm yourself a little right now?"

"Sniff sniff... I understand."

Admitting defeat to Kamito's thoughtful consideration, Rinslet nodded obediently despite her pouting lips.

Chapter 2 - Claire's Suspicions

Part 1

"...Seriously, where did Fianna go off to?"

A few minutes later, Kamito and Claire were walking through the forest.

The barrier constructed by Fianna was quite vast in area. Although Scarlet tried to sniff out the trail of her divine power, it was difficult to track down due to the chaotic leylines.

Even though they had entered the depths of the forest, the imperial princess was nowhere to be found.

"Could it be another forest spirit attack...?"

Muttering softly to himself, Kamito used his hands to part the dense branches.

--Instantly, he found himself at a wide open space.

"This place is..."

Numerous trees lay fallen haphazardly while the ground surface was scorched and scarred.

This was near the «stronghold»'s defensive line. Last night, Team Scarlet had engaged Nepenthes Lore in a deadly battle precisely at this location.

Dirt and mud lingered all around. Even though there should be no risk of having divine power stolen anymore, Kamito was still hesitant to step on the stuff.

"...It still seems quite unbelievable. To think we defeated that kind of monster."

Witnessing the sight before them, Claire was mesmerized for an instant. Kamito also nodded lightly.

Nepenthes Lore -- the unidentified monster that Restia had called the Demon King's will, was the strongest being that Kamito had fought in these past few months.

(...Had it been myself two months earlier, surely I would not have won.)

Kamito silently sighed in his thoughts. The only reason he had been able to win, just barely, was because he had the support of his teammates in addition to his gradual recovery of his power from three years ago.

"Hey, Kamito..."

"Hmm?"

As if suddenly thinking of something, Claire spoke up.

Her gaze was directed towards a dark patch of marsh. It was where Nepenthes Lore was destroyed.

"Back then, Kamito, you were using Ren Ashbell's sword skills, right?"

"...!"

Kamito's body suddenly froze.

...Looks like she had not forgotten.

The Ninth Form of the Absolute Blade Arts -- «Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance». This was the mystic sword technique taught by the premier member of the Empire's prided Numbers, the one renowned as the continent's strongest elementalist, Greyworth Ciel Mais.

And Kamito had used that move in front of Claire and the rest.

Even though he had no chance of winning unless the secret sword was used, it was far too careless of him.

He had completely forgotten that Claire and the girls idolized her from three years ago. As soon as he used her sword skills, the girls would definitely recognize them.

(However, in the end, my identity was not exposed.)

...With some thought, covering up shouldn't be too hard.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, Kamito desperately racked his brain for excuses.

"I used to learn sword skills from that old hag Greyworth. Maybe that girl received sword instruction from Greyworth too."

"W-What old hag... Don't be so rude to the Principal!"

"...No, but she really is an old hag based on her age. That «Dusk Witch» is a complete monster."

Kamito shrugged, turned right and continued walking.

"She's not here either. Let's go back into the forest--"

"Wait a sec."

Claire gripped Kamito's shoulder tightly.

"...W-What are you doing?"

Kamito's face twitched.

"Just now, you were trying to deceive me, right?"

"...No I wasn't?"

"You, are you hiding something from me?"

Claire glared intently at Kamito with her eyes of ruby.

...Looks like this reason isn't enough to misdirect her.

"W-Why would I need to hide anything from you?"

"Umm, well, that..."

Claire pouted, deep in thought.

Apparently she had not noticed that Kamito was actually the Strongest Blade Dancer three year ago. Instead, her suspicions were probably directed towards a connection between Kamito and Ren Ashbell -- probably something on that level.

"The elemental waffe Ren Ashbell used was indeed a demon sword with the darkness attribute, right?"

This time, Claire brought up a crucial point.

"Few as they are, darkness spirits aren't actually that rare. If you're trying to say it was Restia, you're making a huge mistake."

Even though tumultuous feelings rippled through his heart, Kamito maintained a calm expression as he answered.

"You're saying it's pure coincidence?"

"Yeah. You seem to be harboring some kind of strange hopes, but let me clarify beforehand. I am not Ren Ashbell's acquaintance."

(...Because I am Ren Ashbell, not her acquaintance.)

Kamito added in his mind.

"R-Really..."

Probably because Kamito's tone of voice had become forceful involuntarily, Claire's shoulder seem to stiffen slightly.

"Because you used the same sword skills, I was wondering if you might have been fellow pupils of the same master..."

"...Who knows? Anyway, I don't know the details."

Leaving those words, Kamito stepped quickly into the forest.

"Wait, wait a minute, wait up, come on! ...What's the matter, are you angry?"

Twintails swaying, Claire hastily chased after him.

"...No, there's nothing to be angry about."

Kamito slowed down his pace and scratched his head a little apologetically.

"You know I admire Ren Ashbell very much, right?"

"Uh, yeah..."

Kamito nodded as he concealed the wavering in his heart.

(...Said to my face like this, it's quite embarrassing.)

"Not only me but all the elementalists from the continent are enamored by her blade dance."

However—suddenly, Claire gloomily shook her head.

"--She's changed, in just a mere three years."

"..."

Kamito silently turned his gaze to his left hand.

(Changed eh...)

Alternatively, Claire may have superimposed her impressions of Ren Ashbell and her elder sister.

The one who betrayed the Elemental Lord to become the Calamity Queen, Rubia Elstein.

She too, was once revered by all the elementalists of the entire continent.

"However--"

Claire halted her steps.

"Actually I began to realize quite early on -- perhaps, the Ren Ashbell who is attending the current «Blade Dance» might be an imposter."

"Why do you think that?"

"Just intuition. Or perhaps wishful thinking? But everyone else in our team thinks so too."

"Well, that can't be ruled out for sure."

Kamito felt that a direct denial would be overly suspicious, so he decided to answer ambiguously instead.

"However, if that is the case -- then why has the true Ren Ashbell not stepped forward?"

"...M-Maybe there are other reasons?"

"Right. For example -- Kamito-kun is Ren Ashbell or the like."

"...!?"

Suddenly, a voice came from somewhere.

"...Fianna!?"

Appearing out of the rustling leaves was the imperial princess with a mischievous smile.

"Seriously, what are you doing? Everyone is worrying about you!"

Claire glared at Fianna with her arms akimbo.

"Repairing holes in the barrier. Thanks to the battle yesterday, there are numerous damaged areas."

Answering in that manner, Fianna looked successively at Claire and Kamito. Then she spoke:

"What about you two, were you having a tryst right here?"

"O-Of, o-of course not. Don't make such a strange accusation!"

Claire cried out, her face fully red.

"B-By the way, what did you mean by that statement just now? That Kamito is--"

"Hoho, exactly what the words stated."

The imperial princess seemed to be smiling with great amusement.

(Hey hey, what the heck, Fianna!?)

Kamito's heart raced.

He frantically gestured with his eyes towards Fianna but she feigned ignorance.

"...What nonsense, how could that be possible? Disregarding other issues for now, Ren Ashbell is a girl, you know!"

With a shocked expression, Claire directly rejected the idea... Oh well, that was probably the normal reaction.

"That's right, I'm just testing out a wonderful delusion."

Fianna answered as if trying to change the subject, then she immediately embraced Kamito's arm.

Boing.

"Fianna!?"

The softness of her bosom surprised Kamito, causing him to blush.

"W-What are you doing!?"

"Fufu. Hey Claire, may I borrow Kamito-kun for a while?"

"Eh? N-No way! Kamito is my possession!"

...Claire instantly yelled out a statement that any third party not in the know would have instantly misunderstood.

"When did he become Claire's belonging... Anyway, what's your answer, Kamito-kun?"

The imperial princess turned her mischievous smile towards Kamito.

If you refuse then your true identity will be exposed♪ -- the imperial princess' eyes seemed to be saying that.

"Ah yes... I happen to have something to discuss with Fianna too."

Kamito nodded repeatedly like a strung up puppet.

"Ah, w-wait up!"

"I-I'm sorry, Claire..."

Wrapped around Kamito's arm, Fianna led him rapidly towards the depths of the forest.

"J-Jerk! Kamito is an idiot--!"

From behind, the crack of the whip could be heard.

Part 2

"Fufu, that was so close♪"

"...What the heck were you trying to do? You almost blew my cover!"

Within the dense thicket, Kamito was being led by the arm by Fianna.

Although the soft sensation of her bosom made Kamito's heart race, he still protested as if he was unhappy.

"Kamito-kun, you're so amusing when you're agitated."

"Come on, you..."

Kamito groaned with his eyes half-narrowed... Seriously, this imperial princess is such a handful.

"Just kidding. But you should thank me because I actually helped you out."

Kamito tilted his head quizzically.

"Helped me out, how? Claire was already starting to suspect that I am Ren Ashbell. Saying something like that would only increase her suspicions--"

"--That's why."

Fianna raised her index finger.

"No matter how much she suspects, the fact that Kamito-kun turns out surprisingly to be Ren Ashbell -- something so ridiculous would surely be dismissed as impossible to believe, right? Then simply take the plunge and tell her the truth, for that will lead her to rule out that possibility."

"I see. That does make sense."

Kamito could not help but feel impressed with Fianna.

...As expected of the imperial princess skilled in negotiations. To think she thought that far ahead.

"Hmm, but isn't there the risk that Claire might actually believe it?"

"Well, in that event, I would think up something on the fly."

"My admiration for you was for naught."

Faced with Fianna's nonchalance, Kamito sighed lightly.

"But it's better to be more careful. That girl is sometimes inexplicably sharp with her intuition. In this particular regard, she is truly Rubia-sama's younger sister, even though their personalities are completely different... We've arrived, this is it."

Fianna suddenly halted her steps.

The tree branches were densely entangled around this spot, creating a dead end.

"...This?"

"This is the space protected by a special barrier. You could even call it my personal room."

After Fianna extended her hand and chanted a spirit language incantation, the criss-crossing branches instantly disentangled.

Under her guidance, Kamito stepped towards the depths.

"This is..."

It was a hemispherical space delineated by flourishing trees. Gentle sunlight shone through layers of leaves to form speckled shadows on the ground. This space seemed far more spacious than one would imagine as a personal room. In fact, it was enough to perform a blade dance freely.

"How strange, I didn't notice this when searching for you just now, Fianna."

"Because it is surrounded by a small-scale «Isolation Barrier». Even a spirit would find it difficult to discern."

...I see. So that's why it couldn't be found.

"But why did you bring me here?"

"..."

"Fianna?"

Seeing Fianna suddenly so awkwardly unsettled, Kamito's gaze turned to surprise.

"Umm... I-If it's here, then we won't be disturbed..."

"Eh?"

Fianna blushed with embarrassment and immediately--

Rustle rustle. She slowly placed her hands on the chest portion of her uniform.

"W-What are you doing!?"

"I-I just want to repeat what Kamito-kun was doing with Est just now."

"...Wha!?"

Kamito felt the intense beating of his heart.

Fianna shyly removed her uniform and unbuckled her skirt.

Swish. The seductive sound of clothing friction could be heard.

In the next instant, appearing in Kamito's view was--

Clad in a pearl-white bondage suit, the imperial princess' figure.

...Although it was similar to what Est was wearing just now, Fianna's full body restraints had an even more stimulating design.

The low riding leather panties hugging her bottom tightly were quite erotic.

"Y-You, this outfit..."

Just as Kamito stared in shock--

"S-Seriously, to think you actually enjoyed seeing girls dressed like this... Kamito-kun, you're such a pervert."

Fianna blushed as she rubbed her legs together shyly.

"N-No, wait a minute, did you misunderstand something!?"

Kamito frantically yelled out.

"...Misunderstand?"

"Uh yeah. About just now. How should I put it? It was simply Est's mistake... I didn't ask her to dress like that. I don't have those kinds of interests!"

"...Yes, I understand."

Fianna nodded slightly nervously.

"What you enjoy, Kamito-kun... Is not the M role... But the S, right♪"



"No! You're completely mistaken!"

"There's no need to hide it. N-No matter which side you desire, I am fine with it."

"You've totally got the wrong idea!"

Protesting vehemently, Kamito began to pant.

"Like I said, just now was a--"

Kamito desperately tried to correct Fianna's misunderstanding caused by the scene of Est in the tent.

Hearing Kamito's explanation, Fianna was struck with a shocked expression--

"...So, in other words, Kamito-kun, you're really uninterested in that area?"

"That's right."

Kamito answered glumly.

"This is simply... My misunderstanding?"

"Oh well, indeed..."

After Kamito nodded--

"...~!"

Fianna's face suddenly went all red.

"Sniff sniff... A-As a princess of the Empire, to think I disgraced myself so..."

Due to excessive shame, she covered her face as she rolled along the ground.

Kamito had never seen Fianna so distraught... It felt rather cute actually.

"To think I acted so embarrassingly before Kamito-kun... I want to die, I must bite my tongue and commit suicide."

"W-Wait, stop...!"

Because the imperial princess was murmuring dangerous words, Kamito frantically comforted her.

"E-Even though I don't have an interest in that area, Fianna, you don't have to be embarrassed by that attire... Rather, umm, I think you look very pretty."

"...Really?"

Fianna asked in surprise, slightly blushing.

Restrained by the tight bondage suit, her bosom displayed cleavage that seemed especially dazzling.

Kamito held his breath and nodded.

"...I'm so glad."

She was instantly reassured.

"A-Actually, dressing like this makes me very embarrassed."

...Naturally. Even though the imperial princess always loved to tease Kamito, she was at her core a very pure and innocent girl.

"...Could you stop toying with me. It's scary."

Kamito shrugged as he sat down on a tree stump.

"But I clearly wasn't toying around..."

"Hmm?"

"Nothing, okay."

The imperial princess turned her gaze away as if displeased.

Even though Kamito could not figure out why she was angry--

"But anyway, this is really a wonderful place."

Gazing at the sunlight streaming in from between the branches that acted as a ceiling, Kamito offered his opinion.

This was quite serene. In a place like this, he should be able to concentrate and meditate alone.

At this time, Kamito's gaze was suddenly drawn to the branches covering the area.

(Snapped and broken... No, this was cut by a sharp blade?)

If they had been trimmed, it was done too carelessly. It felt like someone was swinging a sword and struck branches by accident.

(Also, these footprints are...)

Kamito once again turned his gaze to the ground. There were signs that the grass had been stepped on hard haphazardly. Unless vigorous activity had occurred in this place, such trails should not be left in the grass.

"Fianna, what were you doing here until just now?"

Slightly suspicious, Kamito asked.

"Of course I was practicing for kissing with Kamito-kun♪"

Fianna instantly replied.

"..."

"S-Seriously, Kamito-kun, don't make me say something so embarrassing..."

The imperial princess chided.

"...Then in actual fact?"

Coughing lightly once, Kamito asked again--

"...You're so dense all the time, but only in this area are you really sharp."

Fianna sighed as if she gave up resisting.

"Say, can you keep this a secret from Claire?"

"...? Ah yeah, I know."

Seeing Kamito nod, Fianna sat down by his side.

"--I was here, receiving sword training from «Georgios»."

"Sword...?"

In response to Fianna's quiet confession, Kamito questioned.

Within «Team Scarlet», Fianna's role lay in support through ritual dancing. Based on this premise, having her wield a sword in battle should almost never happen. Besides, she was also uninitiated in combat training, having never been trained as an elemental at the Academy.

"Of course, this isn't any official training, but I'm simply learning some sword skills for self-defense. At the very least, I hope I can protect myself."

"Why would you suddenly think of this? Even self-defense sword skills cannot be learned overnight--"

"I know. However..."

Fianna bit her lower lip hard.

It was an expression that lost her usual composure, full of desperation.

"...I can't bear it. For me to be always protected and a burden to everyone else."

"Fianna, you support the team most splendidly. The only reason we defeated that Nepenthes Lore was thanks to your perfectly constructed barrier."

"The credit all lies with Milla's efforts. I didn't make any difference at all."

Fianna shook her head.

"At the time, even if I had joined in on the frontlines I would have been a burden. When clearly Claire and the rest could support you, Kamito-kun, very well."

...Looks like she's especially lacking in confidence.

(...The fight against Nepenthes Lore was simply a trigger.)

It was most likely a notion that had entered Fianna's mind a long time ago.

"I have never thought of you as a burden, Fianna."

Kamito said as he looked straight into Fianna's face.

"Claire, Ellis and Rinslet are the same. Everyone trusts in you."

"Kamito-kun..."

Adorned by adorable lashes, her dusk-colored eyes fluttered slightly.

"...Thank you for comforting me."

"It's not comforting, I'm just speaking the truth."

Kamito shyly turned his gaze away.

"Fufu, Kamito-kun is tsundere♪"

A usual mischievous smile surfaced on Fianna's face as she quietly stood up.

"It's almost time to return, or else Claire and the girls will worry."

"Claire already knows we're together. There's nothing to worry about--"

"...Good grief, I'm not talking about that type of worry."

As Fianna shrugged helplessly, Kamito could only watch in puzzlement.

Part 3

"What the heck, Kamito is such a jerk. I don't care about him..."

Meanwhile, Claire was sitting with her knees up against her chest, throwing pebbles at the river.

Behind her, Scarlet was prowling back and forth as if worried about its master.

"Kamito belongs to me..."

...Plop. Water splashed in the distance.

At this moment, the sound of someone stepping on the sandy ground could be heard.

"C-Claire, what are you doing? You look so gloomy."

"Ellis..."

The one who spoke to Claire was Ellis. Even though their relationship was originally like natural enemies at the Academy, it had progressed enough after they became teammates that they could now discuss many matters.

As a side note, Scarlet frantically disappeared as soon as Ellis was spotted.

"Has Her Highness the imperial princess been found?"

"Yeah. She's probably making out with Kamito right now!"

Throwing a bigger stone, Claire patted her skirt and stood up.

"...Hmm. What are you talking about? What is going on?"

Ellis' eyebrows shot up.

Seeing that, Claire told her what just happened in the forest.

"...I see. Kamito was taken away by Her Highness the imperial princess."

Hearing Claire's explanation, Ellis showed a solemn expression and nodded.

As a further side note, the reason why she always referred to Fianna as Her Highness the imperial princess even though they were fellow teammates, was because she hailed from a family of knights who served the Ordesia imperial family throughout the generations.

"Speaking of which..."

Ellis rested her chin on her hand and murmured softly.

"So Claire, you noticed as well. That sword skill used by Kamito."

"Yeah. Even though Kamito said he didn't know her, and that it was simply coincidence that they both learned the same sword skill from Principal Greyworth."

"Really? Since Kamito said so, then that's probably the case."

"...But somehow I keep feeling like he's hiding something. About Ren Ashbell."

Claire frowned, deep in agonizing thought.

If there was no relation at all, Kamito's attitude was far too suspicious.

(...Come to think of it.)

Suddenly, Fianna's words surfaced in Claire's mind.

--For example, Kamito-kun is Ren Ashbell or the like?

(Impossible, right...)

Claire instantly shook her head.

They simply used the same sword skill... That idea was really ludicrous.

(Kamito is the one I idolize, that kind of thing--)

But inexplicably... Claire could not calm her thoughts.

From early on, Claire's intuition had always been exceedingly sharp. Now the turmoil in her heart felt similar to that feeling. Or perhaps, at least in the area of intuition, Claire had inherited the same disposition that her elder sister had as the «Queen».

Kamito had said -- I am not Ren Ashbell's acquaintance.

But reflecting on this deeper--

(...He did not say he was not Ren Ashbell herself.)

Claire voiced out her sudden idea, but--

"...What are you talking about?"

Ellis shrugged in exasperation.

"What, I'm just saying it's possible, that's all!"

"How could it? Besides, three years ago, wasn't Ren Ashbell a beautiful young maiden? Purely in terms of probability, I think it is more believable that the masked elementalist you mentioned from «Team Inferno» is the one."

"That girl is definitely an imposter posing as Ren Ashbell. The true Ren Ashbell isn't someone like her!"

"Of course, I hope so too--"

Ellis regretfully stopped talking. At this time, Claire suddenly recalled a certain incident.

"...! Speaking of which, I once witnessed Kamito's cross-dressing look."

"W-What!? Kamito has that kind of fetish!?"

"Of course not. It was for the purpose of destroying the «Brand of Darkness» engraved by that Ren Ashbell when he and Fianna slipped into the «Divine Ritual Institute». But because of that, I got to see Kamito who looked like a super cute girl in every way."

"Hmm... W-Was he really that cute?"

Ellis murmured, greatly interested.

"One more thing. Ren Ashbell was fourteen years old when she won the «Blade Dance» last time. Calculating from that, Kamito's age matches perfectly."

"...!"

Ellis gasped.

"C-Could it be true, impossible..."

"Yeah, of course, I'm only half convinced at this point..."

Or rather, Claire did not really believe in that possibility.

However, Kamito's attitude earlier was quite suspicious. This meant that the possibility was not zero.

"...Should we confirm it?"

Ellis spoke softly as if resolving herself.

"How do we confirm it? If we ask him directly, he'll surely change the subject."

"I have an idea. Tonight I can discreetly test him while we're on guard duty."

"Can that really be done?"

Claire tilted her head with a skeptical expression. This straight and serious Captain of the Knights did not seem like she was skilled in that area at all.

"Yes, leave it to me."

Ignoring Claire's unease, Ellis nodded confidently.

Part 4

In the depths of the forest far away from «Team Scarlet»'s stronghold--

A luxurious oriental shrine was built where the forest had been cleared.

This was the camp of the «Four Gods» representing the Quina Empire.

Currently, before the shrine, an imperial council was being held with the princess in the center.

"--Well then, present your views."

A solemn voice could be heard from behind the sheer curtains.

This was the voice of the Quina Empire's third princess and commander of the «Four Gods», Her Highness Linfa Sin Quina.

In front of the shrine, three girls stood ready, dressed in Quina style clothes.

"I offer my counsel in trepidation, Linfa-sama."

The one who stepped forward was a girl in green attire.

Rao Rin -- the user of the divine beast spirit «Azure Dragon».

"May I boldly express dissent with regard to engaging «Team Scarlet» in battle at this point in time."

"Why? Report your reasoning."

"Granted, with Linfa-sama and the combined might of the «Four Gods», annihilating a nameless second-rate team is no difficult matter. However, after battling them, in our moment of exhaustion, if that «Team Inferno» led by the Strongest Blade Dancer were to attack--"

"Hmm... Hakua, Shao, do you two agree with her?"

"Since Rao says so, Hakua believes it is fine."

"I only care about fighting strong opponents."

Hakua of the «Black Tortoise» and Shao of the «White Tiger» responded respectively.

"...You two's answers really add nothing to the discussion."

A sigh was heard coming from behind the curtains. Rao continued persistently.

"I humbly petition Linfa-sama to reconsider. Even though they are a team of little renown, «Team Scarlet» definitely should not be underestimated. Since we have already secured enough «Magic Stones» for advancing to the finals, there is not need to take unnecessary risks."

"Hmm, but then..."

The imperial princess seemed quite troubled.

"Actually, the declaration of war was already sent out."

"What! W-Why did you do something so willful on your own! You must discuss with us before making such important decisions, how many times have I repeated that!?"

"That is precisely why I did not discuss with you people."

"Please discuss with us before deciding!"

Rao was howling angrily, almost roaring... In such a state, there was no longer any reverence displayed towards the imperial princess.

"Send out a messenger immediately to retract it! Now!"

"No way! How could a declaration of war be so easily retracted once sent out!?"

"I-Indeed, even though that is true..."

Shao patted the speechless Rao on the shoulder.

"Oh well, don't get so angry, okay? After all, whether «Team Scarlet» or «Team Inferno», isn't it fine so long as we slaughter them all?"

"How could it be that simple? «Team Scarlet» does indeed possess that male elementalist who was able to fight Leonora Lancaster to a draw. Even if we win, it will surely be a tough battle--"



"Indeed, it is that male elemental!"

Suddenly, the imperial princess exclaimed.

"...Linfa-sama?"

"It is precisely for the mission of exterminating that atrocious immoral tyrant that I have issued the declaration of war!"

"The atrocious immoral tyrant?"

"Hmm, you all should have heard rumors. That tyrant, Kazehaya Kamito, surrounded by pure and innocent ladies of nobility, immersed in unspeakable acts of lechery!"

"I-Indeed, such rumors have reached our ears..."

Recalling those numerous and terrifying rumors, Rao's shoulders shuddered.

"That bestial king of lust not only forces cute girls to attend to him in bed, but also compels them to be perversely attired in nakedness with only kneesocks."

"...What a pervert!" "Truly a pervert."

Shao and Hakua frowned.

"Furthermore, during this current «Blade Dance», unsatisfied with pushing down girls from enemy teams, he even strips them and v-v-vio.."

"Violates them?"

"H-Hakua, how could you say such a word before the princess!?"

Rao cried out, her face all red.

"I-In any case, such an indecent bestial king of lust must be exterminated as soon as possible. This is no longer an issue of «Magic Stones»!"

"I-Indeed that is true..."

"Oh well, but wait a minute, we haven't heard Rion's opinion yet?"

Shao suddenly interrupted.

Rion Sharma was the last member of the «Four Gods», the user of the divine beast spirit, the «Vermillion Bird».

She was entrusted with the mission of scouting for «Team Inferno»'s stronghold.

...Although they had asked her to return before they held the current imperial council, she had yet to make her appearance.

"Could she have failed in her mission?"

"Unlike you, Rion is much more prudent. That cannot--"

"--Your Highness' trust in my unworthy self, fills me with trepidation."

At this very moment, a voice of great clarity could be heard from the forest, accompanied by footsteps.

"Oh Rion, what tardiness!"

"What on earth have you been doing? Everyone is so worried about you."

Appearing before their eyes was a red-haired girl dressed in crimson attire.

The girl walked up to the shrine and knelt down on one knee before the curtain.

"Rion Sharma, announcing her return thus."

"Yes, thank you for your efforts. Hurry and report on the movements of «Team Inferno», okay?"

"Yes, Ren Ashbell and the rest seemed to have already gathered sufficient numbers of «Magic Stones» and are not venturing out of their «stronghold». They are probably setting aside their prepared military spirit in wait for the finals. If we want to attack «Team Scarlet», now should be a perfect opportunity."

"In other words, we have nothing to fear. --Thus it is decided, we of the «Four Gods» shall exterminate the atrocious immoral bestial king of lust, Kazehaya Kamito!"

With the shout of orders from the imperial princess Linfa, the girls of the «Four Gods» nodded in unison.

Only one person--

No one noticed, but displayed on the lips of Rion Sharma as she continued keeping her head bowed was a smile of mockery.

Chapter 3 - Ellis' Questioning

Part 1

--On the fourth day of the «Blade Dance», no large scale battles occurred.

In order to prepare for the impending battle against the «Four Gods» the next day, Kamito and his group chose to solidify their defenses at their «stronghold».

Even though there were isolated battles in the surroundings of the «stronghold», the enemies were easily repelled by the Raven Class combo of Claire and Rinslet who were sent out to scout.

That night after dinner, the team gathered for a discussion about their formation for the blade dance the next day.

In particular, Kamito alone was taking the role of attack as the vanguard. Support was assigned to Ellis and Claire in the middle guard. The rear guard consisted of Fianna in charge of support and Rinslet to protect her while performing sniper's duties.

Due to the midday conversation, Kamito was a bit concerned about Fianna but her attitude was not significantly different from usual. Let alone Kamito, she definitely had no wish of letting the other girls know about her sense of inferiority.

After the meeting, Fianna once again disappeared by herself, claiming to repair the barrier.

"...Fianna, I can understand your anxiety, but please be careful not to force yourself too much."

Hearing Kamito's words, Fianna answered:

"Don't worry. I will do my best for the battle tomorrow."

She smiled and nodded.

--Then late night arrived.

In accordance with the shift schedule, Kamito and Ellis began their night patrol.

Although the chances of enemy spirits attacking the stronghold directly were exceedingly low, they were not zero. Even if simply for the sake of containment, it was necessary to be on guard.

The pair lit firewood at the edge of the forest as they watched for suspicious signs.

"...No one is attacking. Otherwise, we could eliminate them directly."

The fire crackled.

Ellis sat with one knee up while looking up at «Ray Hawk»'s spear tip as she spoke.

"Probably because Fianna's raised barrier is exceptionally powerful, so it's difficult to breach and invade."

Sitting opposite to her, Kamito agreed as he subtly averted his gaze.

This was because Ellis' raised knee had lifted her skirt, giving a tantalizing view of what lay beneath. Due to the fact that Ellis was simply in a posture for springing into immediate action, Kamito did not bother with unnecessary comments since it would only make her angry.

"But by the way, it feels like battles between teams this time are not occurring very often."

"...Ah yes, indeed, this «Tempest» is slightly atypical."

"How so?"

Ellis tilted her head with a blank expression.

"Too many teams were eliminated in the beginning. Like Milla's «Rupture Division» and our own Academy's «Team Wyvern». In addition to these two, quite a few other teams have also been annihilated. Simply within this brief period of three days, and especially by one team."

Kamito raised a finger as he spoke.

"Hearing those rumors, other teams must be trying to take precautions against «Team Inferno» and chose to secure their strongholds instead. And the more simple reason is because the number of elementalists remaining in the grounds are fewer. Even though some teams have not been completely annihilated, there should be many cases of eliminated members."

"...Hmm, I see."

Ellis displayed an expression as if she only half understood.

(But not just that...)

Kamito secretly added in his mind.

(...The current «Blade Dance» is also a bit strange.)

For example, there was the existence of Nepenthes Lore.

That monster was not an elemental -- Rather, it couldn't even be counted as human.

That sort of abnormal existence was not supposed to qualify to compete in the «Blade Dance».

(...And speaking of abnormal, there's also Restia.)

Regardless of the actual truth, since her spirit contract with Kamito had not been rescinded, she was still supposed to be Kamito's contracted spirit. As for how she was registered as a member of «Team Inferno», Kamito still held doubts.

Just as Kamito fell into deep thought--

Sitting opposite him, Ellis suddenly shivered.

"What's the matter, are you cold?"

"...Yes, the fire seems to have died down a bit."

Even though Areishia Academy's uniforms were imbued with anti-cold magic, «Ragna Ys» at night was still quite chilly. Simply the heat from a campfire was not enough to keep warm.

"Ellis, can't you use your wind type magic to shelter this place?"

"I-I suppose I could, if it had to be done..."

Ellis nodded but her answer seemed quite ambiguous.

Somehow Kamito felt that a barrier for sheltering two people should be completely effortless for her--

"Anyway, besides that, Kamito..."

"Hmm?"

Ellis coughed dryly to clear her throat.

...Her face went red inexplicably.

"Umm, may I sit beside you?"

"Eh?"

"S-So long as we lean close together, th-then wouldn't we stay warm!?"

"Well, that's what people say..."

While Kamito was still hesitating, Ellis rapidly went around the fire and drew near to sit down at a delicate distance from him, with their shoulders so close they could very well be touching.

This time her knees were drawn up while her shins slanted outwards. A more girlish manner of sitting.

Clutching her skirt tensely, she lowered her gaze to the ground.

"..."

Maintaining this posture, Ellis stared blankly for a few seconds.

"Umm, what's up? For you to suddenly act like this..."

"Ah... Umm, w-would sitting beside you cause you trouble?"

Ellis frantically spoke.

Blushing intensely, she was awkwardly squeezing the hem of her skirt.

"How could that possibly be true? Don't suddenly get so formal and distant."

"Uwah!"

Seeing Kamito lean closer on his own accord, Ellis screamed adorably.

Before the campfire, the two leaned tightly together, shoulder against shoulder.

...I see, this does feel quite warm.

"Haah, fu..."

...Although Kamito was beginning to feel overly conscious of Ellis' breathing sounds.

"What's the matter, Ellis? Did you get a fever?"

"I-I'm fine, but I am still feeling a bit cold. If we bring ourselves closer together, I think I'll probably be warm enough!"

Ellis shook her head and pressed her shoulder even closer.

"W-Wait a minute! If you get any closer, it'll be bad!"

Kamito frantically tried to pull back his distance.

If this continued, let alone her shoulder, even Ellis' soft and gentle bosom was going to touch Kamito's arm.

"N-No, don't mind other things, there is simply no better way to keep the cold away!"

"No, how could I possibly not mind!?"

Just as that soft sensation of her bosom was making Kamito blush and his heart race...

A small cluster of flames jumped out from the thicket beside them with a pop.

"...W-What?"

Kamito gazed intently at the small cluster of flames suddenly appearing before his eyes.

It was a small lizard with its tail on fire.

A low level flame spirit.

"Oh, it's a salamander. How fortunate. This will strengthen the fire a bit."

Kamito pinched the salamander by its tail and placed it on the campfire.

Immediately, the campfire grew stronger.

"S-See, this way we can stay warm without getting too close together."

"...Sniff, this spirit appeared at a very wrong time."

Ellis seemed to be on the verge of tears as she glared at the salamander on the campfire.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing!"

She angrily turned her face away.

...We finally get warmed up, but for some reason her mood suddenly soured.

"..."

"..."

For a brief while, the two remained silent--

"Kamito..."

"Hmm?"

Ellis was the first to break the silence.

Taking out a pen and notebook from the breast of her uniform, she stared intently at Kamito's face.

"...Are you taking notes of some kind?"

Kamito frowned in puzzlement.

Ellis coughed lightly and spoke.

"Kamito, starting now, I will ask you a few questions. I hope you can answer honestly."

"...? Uh sure..."

Although Kamito could not tell what Ellis' intentions were, he could see from her eyes that she was serious.

Kamito nodded and nervously held his breath.

"So, first question, Kamito, you--"

Ellis' brown eyes flashed sharply.

"D-Do you like soft and fluffy cotton candy?"

".....Huh?"

Kamito could not help but exclaim, completely stupefied.

"W-What the heck, what kind of question is that?"

"I-It's important, please answer."

Nevertheless, Ellis remained exceptionally serious as always.

Completely lost, Kamito had no choice but to answer.

"...Oh well, I don't dislike it, but I'm not particularly crazy about it either."

Kamito did not have special preferences in food, but speaking of cotton candy, that felt more like food meant for girls.

"I-I see..."

Ellis breathed a sigh of relief for some reason and recorded something in her notebook.

"...What are you writing down?"

"Well, next question--"

Ignoring Kamito's question, Ellis looked up from her notebook.

"W-When taking a bath, which part of the body do you start washing first?"

"...W-Why are you asking these kinds of questions!?"

"It's important! ...Or are you implying you have something to hide?"

Ellis stared dead straight at Kamito.

...No no, I have completely no idea what she's suspicious about.

"Not really like that... Oh well, normally I start with the arms."

"The arms... I see..."

Ellis nodded as if she figured out something then made a note in her book.

(...W-What is going on here!?)

Similar questions were asked one after another in this manner--

"W-Well then, here comes the last question."

"...Finally the last one eh."

Kamito sighed with exhaustion.

"Umm, you..."

With an embarrassed expression, Ellis gazed into Kamito's face.

With a barely audible voice, she said:

"...Do you like girls with huge busts?"

"Eh?"

--A question of that sort.

"C-Conversely, do you hate girls with huge busts...?"

"W-Why do you have to ask that..."

"D-Don't make me spell it out, you jerk..."

Ellis bit down hard on her cherry-colored lips.

Supporting herself with both hands on the ground, she slowly drew her face near.



"...E-Ellis!?"

"T-Then answer me..."

Kamito could catch a glimpse of her cleavage down the front of her uniform. Her slender neck showed faint signs of sweat.

A uniquely feminine fragrance was beginning to make Kamito's consciousness hazy--

--At this very moment.

"Hot, that burns!"

Suddenly, a small spark jumped out from the campfire.

"Hey, are you trying to take advantage of the situation? Do you want to be turned into charcoal!?"

"...!?"

From somewhere came a familiar line... Claire's voice.

Kamito looked around but could not find any signs of Claire.

No--

"...Seriously, you were the one who claimed you could test him discreetly. That's why I entrusted the task to you."

The source of Claire's voice was the salamander in the campfire.

"Claire, w-were you actually watching all this time from just now!?"

Ellis yelled out with her face all red.

"...What is going on?"

Kamito asked the salamander in the campfire.

"This salamander is my familiar. I have currently synchronized my senses with it, in order to keep surveillance to see if you two are doing anything indecent."

"As if anyone was going to do something like that!"

"...Hmph, who knows?"

The salamander coldly glared at the two.

"Y-Yes that's right! I-I definitely wasn't thinking of anything perverted..."

Ellis twiddled her fingers awkwardly as she spoke, but for some reason, her gaze was cast towards somewhere in the distance.

Part 2

"Thou, servant of the king of the child of man, knight and master swordsman!"

In a little space within the forest, an intense storm was raging.

"By the contract of the old blood, become the sword that protects me, come forth and do my bidding!"

From adorable lips, words for releasing a spirit were being chanted.

As her gorgeous black hair fluttered in the wind, the spirit seal carved upon her chest shone with dazzling brilliance.

--In the next instant, accompanied by a flash of pure light, an armored knight was summoned out of empty space.

The heavy silver armor shone and glittered beneath the moonlight streaming in from between the branches.

This was «Georgios» -- a high ranking knight spirit who served the Ordesia imperial family over the generations.

Fianna caressed the cold armor with her hand as she looked up with an impatient expression at the knight before her.

"Please, «Georgios». Become my strength--!"

Closing both eyes, Fianna once again chanted a spirit language incantation.

"Thou shalt be my sword, thou shalt be my shield, with unlimited towering light, purify and exorcise those belonging to darkness--"

Intense light was emitted from all over the knight spirit as an intense cyclone swept the surroundings.

A formidable spirit's power was being released and raised to a level on the verge of explosion.

"Ooh..."

Fianna was actually hiding one more fact from Kamito.

Her training here was not simply in swordsmanship.

She was also secretly trying to use an elemental waffe.

"...Ah...Ooh..."

Due to the intense searing pain, Fianna screamed hoarsely from the depths of her throat.

Unable to control the exploding spirit power, she was currently suffering from the backlash of the reversed flow of divine power.

"...I beg you, please listen to me!"

Being able to use «Elemental Waffen» freely was the precondition for an elementalists to display their true worth.

Nevertheless, elementalists capable of releasing their contracted spirit as elemental waffe were few in number.

Even though Claire and the others seemed to do it effortlessly, in actual fact it was a skill requiring long years of high level training in addition to inborn talent. Of course, as a former «Queen» candidate, Fianna's aptitude was outstanding. However, even for her, this was not something that could be achieved overnight.

(Although I realize this is quite reckless, still, I--!"

"--want to fight alongside Kamito-kun!"

As if responding to Fianna's calls--

The knight spirit's body turned into particles of light and vanished into the air.

(Very good, just a little further...!)

In her mind she imagined a sword that could cut through all creation.

The sword she witnessed the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, use three years ago.

Clutched in her hand, her imagination materialized and gathered--

However, just before completion...

"...Yah!"

The condensed light exploded and the invisible force sent Fianna flying.

Her body fell hard onto the ground.

Due to the failed releasing of the elemental waffe as well as the impact of the reversed flow of divine power.

"...Oooh... W-Why..."

Her shoulders trembling slightly, Fianna clutched at the soil on the ground.

--In the end, even with assistance from the magic circle, she did not succeed in manifesting the elemental waffe.

"...Why doesn't it work!?"

...I want to become stronger so badly.

Clearly, I have no wish of staying as a princess to be protected.

"I still... Haven't given up yet, let's do this once again--"

Biting hard on her lip, Fianna supported herself with one knee against the ground and stood up.

Chapter 4 - The Approaching Snake

Part 1

At dawn, Kamito began preparing to set off after a brief nap.

Using a wooden stick in place of a sword, he swung it around to relax his tense and stiff muscles. Then Kamito walked to the plaza for breakfast.

On this fifth day of the «Blade Dance», the showdown against the «Four Gods» lay ahead.

Although the opposing team was renowned for their strength, «Team Scarlet» had also developed teamwork through numerous intense battles against formidable foes. The «Four Gods» were not impossible to defeat.

At the plaza, the young ladies had already begun preparing breakfast.

"--You have greatly disappointed me. 'Test him discreetly.' Pish posh."

"What are you talking about? My manner of investigation was not wrong!"

"...?"

Kamito suddenly halted his steps.

Claire and Ellis appeared to be having some kind of dispute.

(...Could it be about last night?)

Kamito quietly hid himself in the shadows amongst the trees and listened intently.

He was greatly intrigued by why Ellis was asking those questions last night.

"...Seriously. To think I went as far as to suspect Kamito as Ren Ashbell. Utterly ridiculous. Kamito is innocent, I'm sure of it."

"H-How can you be so sure!?"

"You'll understand as soon as you read this."

Saying that, Ellis took out from her breast pocket the notebook from yesterday.

"What does this explain?"

"Ren Ashbell's favorite food is soft and fluffy cotton candy. When she bathes, she washes her abdomen first. Kamito's answers are completely different."

"...Huh?"

Claire frowned in astonishment.

(...W-What is going on, this is completely incomprehensible!?)

Hidden in the shadows, Kamito could not help but ridicule the situation in his mind.

"What is that? How would you know what Ren Ashbell's favorite food is?"

Claire stared hard at Ellis who crossed her arms with full confidence and explained:

"Any fan who worships her would know this of course. Back then, the magazines had many articles about her and I cut them all out and collected them."

"I-I can't believe you..."

Claire sighed with exasperation.

"Those kinds of reports are surely made up casually. Besides, that question about busts has nothing to do with Ren Ashbell at all!"

"Hmm, umm..."

"You two stop playing around. Hurry and help prepare breakfast!"

Due to the interference of Rinslet's scolding, the two girls' conversation was cut short.

(...I see, so that's what those weird questions last night were about.)

Hiding in the shadows amongst the trees, Kamito felt cold sweat dripping down his cheek.

Ellis' questions were based on the profile of the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell.

...Speaking of which, three years ago, the day before the finals, reporters from every country were swarming Ren Asbell, hoping for an interview.

Even in female attire, Kamito could not disguise his voice. Hence, when faced with the reporters' questions, he simply responded briefly with "yes" or "no" answers. Thanks to that, many ridiculous rumors began to spread from those interviews--

(...However, that's not the issue.)

The troublesome thing was that Claire and the girls were beginning to suspect Kamito's true identity.

Even though they seemed like they were only at the stage of speculation, however--

"Kamito-kun, what's the matter♪"

"Uwah!"

As a cheerful voice spoke to him from behind, Kamito yelled out in surprise.

"Come on, this isn't something worth getting frightened over."

Turning around, Kamito found the mischievous imperial princess showing a hurt expression.

"S-Sorry... The situation has become somewhat of a mess."

"What's the matter?"

"It seems like they're suspecting me of being the Ren Ashbell of three years ago."

Kamito groaned as he crouched on the ground, clutching his head.

"They only seem to be half in doubt, but I fear I'm in trouble if they keep probing further."

"Why don't you just come clean with it all?"

"I don't want to ruin their dreams... Besides, I feel like my relationship with them would also become a bit weird."

"...Indeed that's true. I also want to keep this an exclusive secret just between the two of us."

Fianna smiled lightly.

"Oh well, I'm sure there won't be a problem so long as there are no more slip ups. Besides, Kamito-kun being Ren Ashbell is completely unbelievable from an ordinary person's point of view. I think Claire and the rest are just letting their imaginations run wild frivolously."

"I really hope you're right..."

Just as Kamito was sighing deeply--

He suddenly noticed.

"...Fianna, what happened to your arm?"

Her usually smooth skin was covered with numerous wounds.

"...Oh, this was, umm, caused by sword training with «Georgios» yesterday. Don't worry, I'm fine. I've already cast healing magic so it will recover soon."

Smiling wryly, Fianna shook her head.

"Didn't I already tell you not to force yourself?"

"...Yeah, sorry."

She bowed her head apologetically.

Seeing the usually composed imperial princess show such an expression, Kamito felt uncomfortable.

(...Really, Fianna seems quite anxious.)

Yesterday, she had revealed her worries over whether she was a burden to the team.

Hence, she wanted to become stronger even if it meant pushing herself excessively.

(...But strength obtained in such a manner easily collapses.)

Kamito placed his hand on Fianna's head.

"...Uwah, w-what are you doing?"

"Fianna, I trust you. Do your best."

"Kamito-kun..."

Fianna's dusk-colored eyes wavered subtly.

Faced with her uncharacteristically transient expression, Kamito could not help but feel in his heart--

"...Who's there!?"

Fianna suddenly cried out sharply.

She instantly left Kamito's side and stared into the depths of the thicket warily.

"Fianna, what's the matter?"

"...An ominous presence. This comes from my instincts as a princess maiden."

"Ominous presence--?"

Kamito frowned as he followed her gaze.

--Entering his view was a little snake colored a vivid shade of green, watching them with its widened red eyes.

"...Snake? No, that's--"

"Yeah, an elemental's familiar--"

Just as Fianna whispered softly--

"As expected of the renowned «Lost Queen». Even a familiar's presence was detected."

"...!?"

The snake spoke with an exceptionally sweet girlish voice.

Kamito instantly drew his short sword from his waist and positioned Fianna behind him.

"...Who is it?"

"Fufu, this is the first time for us to converse in this manner."

The snake's laughter was terrifying. Its tongue flicked out as it lifted its body.

"The demon caster of the Alphas Theocracy, ring any bells?"

"Demon caster... Are you Sjora Kahn!?"

Fianna cried out sharply while Kamito stared with his eyes widened with surprise.

Sjora Kahn -- the second-in-command of «Team Inferno».

"I never thought a mere familiar could possibly get through...!"

Fianna bit her lip tightly in dismay.

"In terms of strength, your barrier is quite well done. But thanks to the massive holes opened up by that darkness spirit and Nepenthes Lore, well, hehe."

The snake smiled as it repeatedly licked Fianna's body with its leering gaze.

Under that seemingly poisonous gaze, Fianna was trembling slightly in her shoulders as she stood behind Kamito.

"...Fufu, I knew it. The «Darkness Queen» is more fitting for you."

"...What?"

Just as Kamito frowned in puzzlement over the term--

"Take care then, successor to the Demon King. We shall meet again."

The snake swiftly disappeared into the depths of the thicket.

"Wait--!"

"Chasing it would be pointless. It's just a familiar."

Fianna stopped Kamito as he was about to give chase.

...Indeed, even if it was caught, it was inconsequential.

"Looks like it was spying on us. I'm sorry, this is all because my barrier wasn't perfect enough."

"This isn't your fault, Fianna."

Kamito shrugged.

Hearing the two of them, Claire and the girls approached at this time.

"Kamito, what are you doing in this kind of place?"

"Uh, no..."

...I'm dead meat if they found out I was eavesdropping just now.

Just as Kamito racked his brains for an excuse--

"Fufu, what a shame that we were discovered, Kamito-kun♪"

Fianna embraced Kamito's arm tightly.

"Hey, Fianna!?"

"Wha...! W-What are you doing!?"

"W-What is the meaning of this, Kamito!?"

"What were you doing with Fianna!?"

"Fufu, perverted things, of course♪"

With a victorious expression, Fianna smiled.

" " "...~!" " " "

The three young ladies glared tearfully at Kamito.

(Sigh, can we really beat the «Four Gods» like this...?)

Kamito sighed deeply in his mind.

Part 2

After the little commotion this morning--

«Team Scarlet» finished a light breakfast and set off. The matter of the demon caster's spying in the stronghold was already mentioned during the meal.

"...Sjora Kahn eh. Although it's a bit concerning, we should focus our attention on the showdown against the «Four Gods» instead. If it's simple spying, other teams did it too."

Put it aside for now and don't be too concerned -- That was Claire's opinion.

Kamito had expressed agreement, but--

(...Was it really simple spying?)

Trudging over the soft soil as they made their way, Kamito supported his chin with his hand as he immersed himself in deep thought.

...For some reason, there's an unpleasant premonition.

The mention of the «Darkness Queen» lingered in his mind, causing great unease.

Although he had no impression of ever hearing something like that before -- for some unknown reason, his heart was greatly unsettled.

"Kamito, you're walking too fast."

"...Ah, sorry about that."

Stuck in his thoughts, Kamito had carelessly forgotten to pace himself to accommodate Est.

Holding his hand, Est had been following closely behind Kamito all along. Skipping as she walked, she looked absolutely adorable.

"...I'm so jealous of Est."

"W-Why, why does Kamito dote on Est so much..."

"Truly, Kamito-kun has ascended to the throne of the Demon King of the Daytime."

Kamito could feel the cold and stabbing glares of the young ladies walking together with him.

"Kamito, giving Est special treatment is too unfair -- No wait, this is a battlefield! H-Holding hands like that, you can't immediately react if there's a sudden attack!"

"Well, even though that might be true..."

Having no intention of letting Kamito's hand go, Est held even tighter.

...Apparently, she had no intention of taking sword form.

"I can't stand this, what the heck..."

Claire pouted unhappily.

--In that instant.

"We have been waiting for you, Kazehaya Kamito!"

A girl's voice was heard in the quiet forest.

"...Formation!"

With Claire's orders, the entire team entered a defensive formation.

Kamito immediately performed a releasing chant. As Est's figure disappeared into particles of light in the air, a dazzling silver-white sword, «Terminus Est», appeared in Kamito's hand the next instant.

On the far end of the wide road extending through the forest--

Were four girls dressed in vividly colorful oriental formal attire.

"--Be careful. They are the «Four Gods»."

Claire readied Flametongue as she spoke.

They were quite striking beauties in all regards. Due to the fact that spirits mostly preferred beautiful maidens, having good looks could be considered part of an elementalists' requirements. However, the four standing before them emanated an exotic foreign aura of attractiveness that differed completely from the high-class young ladies at the Academy.

Their form-fitting formal dresses emphasized their supple bodies and each was embroidered with designs representing their respective divine beast.

The skirt portion of the formal dresses all featured daringly high slits, allowing their seductive thighs to flash in and out of view seductively as they walked.

"Seriously, Kamito, where exactly are you looking?"

"Eh?"

"Your gaze is completely focused on those girls' thighs!"

Claire cast her icy cold gaze at Kamito.

"D-Damn it, you're utterly shameless!"

"Truly unbelievable, Kamito, you...!"

"Say, do you really like that kind of dress, Kamito-kun?"

"No, that's not it..."

Kamito frantically shook his head.

Ignoring Kamito and his groups' antics, the girls of the «Four Gods» approached.

"Making your acquaintance for the first time, I am Rao of the «Azure Dragon»."

"I am Hakua of the «Black Tortoise»."

Their black hair styled in buns, the two girls bowed together towards Kamito and his group.

Looking extremely alike, they were most probably sisters.

"Fufu, I am Rion of the «Vermilion Bird»."

"--Shao of the «White Tiger». Please treat me well."

The last to introduce herself was an energetic white-haired beauty.

Her azure eyes displayed a gaze of savagery akin to wild beasts.

(She is the strongest elementalist amongst the «Four Gods»...)

Despite her short stature, her entire body gave off a terrifying aura of combat.

Clearly this was not an opponent he could defeat by concealing his true power.

(But I really want to avoid letting others witness the sword skills I used during my Ren Ashbell era...)

Kamito eyed Claire and the girls behind him.

If he focused entirely on the blade dance, he might possibly use his past sword style naturally.

--Making a grand appearance was a girl in ritual attire.

Because she was quite short, she had been blocked from view by the «Four Gods» until now.

"I am the Quina Empire's third princess -- Linfa Sin Quina!"

The girl ran forward and announced with her chest swelled out in pride.

(...Is that girl the commander of the «Four Gods»?)

It was clear from her ritual attire that she was not an elementalist who fought on the frontlines. Most likely, she was someone who performed ritual dancing like Fianna--

(Speaking of which...)

Kamito stared intently at the imperial princess Linfa's petite body--

(...Her age should be greater than Milla Bassett, right?)

This was what Kamito originally thought.

The youngest participant this time was undoubtedly Milla Bassett.

...But no matter how one looked, this child felt even younger than her.

"Umm, may I ask a question--"

"Speak, bestial king of lust!"

"How old are you currently?"

"Hmm..."

Instantly, Linfa replied with a wary expression--

"A-Are you trying to make this princess one of your conquests!?"

"No, sorry, I have no interest in winning the hearts of children."

Kamito shrugged and waved his hand.

"I-I am not a child, I'm already sixteen!"

"Eh? Are you kidding? I can't believe we're the same age...!"

"Of course it's true! Y-y-you, y-you insolent fellow!"

Linfa angrily pointed her finger at Kamito as she yelled tearfully.

"Damn you, Kazehaya Kamito! A-Absolutely unforgivable! My loyal «Four Gods», this inhuman bestial king of lust must be drawn and quartered instantly!"

Answering to Linfa's orders, the girls of the «Four Gods» summoned their respective «Elemental Waffen».

"Somehow I seemed to have made her angry...?"

"Idiot, who asked you to poke at someone's sore spot! Pay attention, we're up!"

Kamito wielded the «Demon Slayer» with both hands and leaped forward.

--Thus the blade dance began.

Chapter 5 - Four Gods

Part 1

At Linfa's command, the «Four Gods» dispersed.

Charging forward from the front was their ace, Shao Fu. Her arms were equipped with tiger-styled gauntlets as her elemental waffe. She was apparently a close combat type elementalist.

"Claire, leave the vanguard to me."

"Understood. I will guard the back securely together with Ellis."

Hearing Claire's response, Kamito took a step.

Wielded in his hands, Terminus Est's blade emanated faint light rather than the usual dazzling silver-white brilliance. In order to extend combat duration, Kamito suppressed Est's power output.

Although this decreased the power of the elemental waffe greatly, this also lessened Est's burden and would also suppress the demon sword's curse to some extent.

"Haha, a one on one duel eh? How exciting!"

Shao grinned savagely as she rested her gauntlet-wearing fists against her waist.

"The «Four Gods»'s strongest elementalist -- Shao Fu of the «White Tiger», here I come!"

Kamito's sword engaged Shao's fists.

The elemental waffen played a symphony of dissonant tones as the clash of weapons shook the atmosphere.

"...She can even block Est's attacks!?"

"Don't underestimate me. This elemental waffe, the «Divine Tiger Fangs», is a pair of gauntlets combining offense and defense into one."

Shao suddenly lowered her stance and released a godly swift strike.

(So fast...!)

Kamito rapidly reacted to defend -- However, the gauntlet's emblem roared as if it were a real live tiger and bit down on Kamito's arm.

Feeling intense pain in his arm, Kamito suppressed a scream as he tried to shake off the tiger's fangs.

But having caught the prey in its jaws, the tiger's teeth tore through Kamito's muscles and apparently reached deep into his bones.

Using this opportunity, Rao, Hakua and Rion suddenly broke through.

(Crap...)

Kamito was planning to engage at least two enemies, but now three of them had broke past him.

Clicking his tongue, he swapped the «Demon Slayer» to his other hand.

After all, he was used to wielding with either hand. There was no difference to him.

In this manner, Kamito forcefully shook off the gauntlet that was biting him.

The teeth of the «Divine Tiger Fangs» loosened their grip. Shao jumped away with glamorous steps and readied her fists once more to begin a new flurry of rapid punches.

Even though Kamito immediately defended with his sword, he was unable to withstand the impacts fully and was easily blown away.

"There's more to this!"

Shao's petite figure suddenly vanished. In the next instant, she had already closed the distance and was unleashing her punches with godlike speed. As Kamito used his sword to deflect the «Divine Tiger Fangs»'s sharp teeth, intense sparks flew and scattered between them.

Through ever-changing freely flowing movements, Shao did not give Kamito any opportunity to strike back.

(...This girl, she's using the Fist of Assassination!)

Combining a powerful elemental waffe with well-trained physical techniques, she unleashed yet another raging wave of attacks. Furthermore, each strike was heavy and powerful. If any hit were to land on a critical point, it would surely result in a fatal injury.

Kamito continued to dodge the continuous series of punches, but--

"Cough...!"

Intense pain suddenly flooded his entire body.

(What's... Happening...!?)

All this time, Kamito had been able to dodge Shao's quick succession of attacks with the slimmest of margins.

He should not have suffered a critical hit yet--

"The Fist of Assassination -- «The Tiger's Killing Howl». It damages internal organs through invisible shockwaves."

Shao's azure eyes glowed sharply. They were like the eyes of a wild beast that had caught its prey.

"I see..."

Kamito wiped the blood from the corner of his lips and smiled.

"...Looks like I must show off my real skills."

"Don't force yourself. Given the condition of that arm, you won't be able to wield a sword properly--"

In that instant, her words were interrupted by a burst of intense sword pressure.

This sword pressure was produced by Kamito swinging the «Demon Slayer» with one arm.

"--One arm is enough."

Part 2

Claire and Ellis blocked the three incoming elementalists.

Rao of the «Azure Dragon» wielded an azure dragon blade. Hakua of the «Black Tortoise» had a shield. On the other hand, Rion of the «Vermilion Bird» used a club. The three readied the elemental waffen manifested from their respective divine beast spirit.

"Excuse me, but you are not allowed to take a further step forward!"

Yelling out, Claire swung Flametongue.

Fianna's ritual kagura dance was not yet complete. Until Kamito could hurry here to reinforce them, Claire and Ellis had to guard this location with their lives.

Rao of the «Azure Dragon» sprang into action and charged with the azure dragon blade horizontally. Seeing that, Ellis wielded «Ray Hawk» to intercept and blocked the swung azure dragon blade with her spear.

Demonic wind gathered and rumbled at the tip of her spear.

"--Evil winds, go and rampage!"

As Rao swiftly retreated, Ellis released blades of wind towards her.

Innumerable blades sliced apart the ground. However, just as the wind blades were about to strike their target--

Wielding the shield of the «Black Tortoise», Hakua rushed over. Instantly deflected, the wind blades dissipated without trace. That was most likely a defense oriented spirit with the earth attribute, hence a half-baked attack was not going to succeed.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

From the rear guard, Rinslet fired numerous freezing arrows.

--However, this time it was Rao's turn to stand before Hakua, sweeping all of the freezing arrows away.

As expected of the highly renowned «Four Gods». Their teamwork and coordination were on a completely different level.

"O Flames, capture my enemies -- «Flame Chain»!"

Claire swung Flametongue to entangle the cutting edge of the azure dragon blade.

She intended to immobilize the enemy's weapon in this manner.

"Foolish, water with its ever-changing multitude of forms can never be imprisoned!"

The blade of water vanished for an instant. Then turning the hilt of the azure dragon blade, Rao regenerated a new blade.

"Now it's my turn, Onee-chan!"

Aiming for the opening when Claire was withdrawing her flaming whip, Hakua rushed forward with her shield.

Rather than for defending -- this time she was using the shield as a close quarter combat weapon.

"O Earth, may thy roars resound -- «Earth Blast»!"

Crying out, Hakua struck the ground with her elemental waffe, the shield.

Earth attribute spirit magic instantly activated. The ground swelled up, scattering dust clouds. Rather than for causing direct damage, this was an attack aiming to disrupt enemy vision.

"Take this, scorching--"

"Too late."

Just as Claire tried to release a fireball preemptively, Hakua's figure appeared before her.

Instantly charging into her face, Hakua unleashed a punch that exploded in Claire's chest.

"Guh, ahhh...!"

The heavy blow instantly rendered Claire's consciousness hazy. Like Shao, Hakua was also a practitioner of the Fist of Assassination.

With Claire blown away by the impact, Hakua rushed forward for a follow up attack -- However, Rinslet's freezing arrows halted her advance.

Probably because it was troublesome to handle demonic ice which was able to freeze the shield, Hakua chose to escape instead of defending. Using this opening, Claire readied her stance once more to use Flametongue to hinder enemy movements.

"Too naive, Miss Hell Cat."

"...!?"

Rion of the «Vermilion Bird» wielded a crimson club as she charged through the openings in the trajectory of the brandished Flametongue.

Turning her elemental waffe, the club, with one hand, she entangled the fiery Flametongue.

"I can't believe she's absorbing Scarlet's flames...!?"

"Hmph, my divine beast spirit «Vermilion Bird» is indeed a flame spirit servant!"

The crimson club left Rion's hands and transformed into a flaming demonic bird.

Having absorbed Scarlet's flames, the gigantic demonic bird spread its wings in the air.

"Ooh, as expected of a renowned divine beast spirit..."

"Even their cooperation far surpasses us."

The three members of the «Four Gods» naturally surrounded Claire and Ellis who were now standing back to back.

The situation was overwhelmingly unfavorable to Claire's team. While Claire and Ellis were being dominated by their opponents' teamwork, Kamito who was in charge of attack was also tied up with Shao Fu. Even though Linfa did not seem like the type who fought on the frontlines, users of ritual magic often had contracts with powerful spirits. This meant leaving her alone could prove to be quite dangerous.

(Fianna, we're relying on you...)

Claire momentarily turned her gaze towards Fianna who was performing a dance in the back.

Part 3

"--Spirits who inhabit the vast land, please respond to my summons."

Behind the battlefield that was filled with the noise of clashing weapons, Fianna was currently dancing to perform ritual kagura.

As befitted the princess maiden who was once a «Queen» candidate, her dancing was magnificent and beautifully flowing without any hesitation or interruption.

From her lips came the chanting of spirit language to make offerings to the spirits of the land.

"--I am the one who prays for ye protection. I am the one who praises ye power."

Her magnificent dance resembled that of a dancing princess on the battlefield.

However, in contrast to her graceful dancing, Fianna's heart was filled with turmoil.

(I must hurry... If I don't hurry and finish the ritual...)

Relatively far away from her current location, Kamito and Shao Fu were engaged in an intense battle of clashing weapons.

(...No, I must focus my attention to performing the dance here!)

Suppressing the screams in her heart, Fianna made an offering through her dance performance.

Not only Kamito. Her teammates were also fighting desperately.

As the sound of clashing weapons reached her ears, they were transformed into anxiety throughout her body.

(What I can do is only this dance performance...!)

At this moment, Fianna's body suddenly felt lighter.

Her offering of ritual dancing had caused the spirits of the land to respond.

(...Success!)

Beneath her graceful footsteps, a glowing magic circle was being drawn.

This was a ritual dance performance for obtaining the land's blessing for the dancer's comrades.

"The Fourth Variation of Ritual Kagura -- «Oratorio»!"

Part 4

--Clang!

Kamito's «Demon Slayer» and Shao Fu's «Divine Tiger Fangs» clashed intensely with an explosion of sparks.

Every time Kamito swung his sword, blood dripped continuously from his injured right arm.

If he became stuck in a battle of attrition, he would eventually lose consciousness from blood loss.

"Are you a monster!? How could you move like that with this level of injury!?"

However, the anxious one was Shao. Her punches were repeatedly deflected despite their godlike speed. Kamito had already seen through the variations of her moves by now.

(--There were quite a few users of the Fist of the Assassin at the «Instructional School». Even though they might be from different sects, the basic motions were all similar.)

"Well then, try this -- «Roar of the Royal Fang»!"

Shao's «Divine Tiger Fangs» released a shockwave of wind.

The powerful shockwave blew Kamito away.

"I can't believe you even have projectile attacks!"

"That's called a hidden hand!"

Shao grinned savagely as she pounced like an agile beast.

Kamito had no choice but to block her impact while lying on the ground.

(...This is bad, I'm going to lose in strength if this continues.)

Shao's «Divine Tiger Fangs» was the type of elemental waffe which amplified the elementalists' power. In contrast, even though Kamito's «Terminus Est» was the strongest class of sacred sword, it did not have the ability to augment the contractor's own power. Enduring with one arm ultimately had its limits.

"You're apparently not too skilled in groundwork techniques, Kazehaya Kamito!"

From the jaws of the «Divine Tiger Fangs», a shockwave of wind was released at close range this time--

Just at this moment.

"...Wha!?"

Suddenly, shining magic circles surfaced from the surrounding ground.

Kamito took advantage of Shao's moment of surprise to kick her gauntlets away and escaped from the mounted position.

Beneath their feet were numerous magic circles glowing with blue-white light.

As abundant divine power flowed into his body, Kamito found himself brimming with strength.

This was all thanks to Fianna's ritual dance performance -- the «Oratorio» was complete.

"--The tables have turned, Shao."

Wielded in his hand, Kamito's «Demon Slayer» gave off a dazzling brilliance.

As soon as Fianna's magic was complete, the odds were in their favor. So long as Kamito received the abundant divine power provided by the leylines, he could unleash the power of the strongest elemental waffe without reservation.

"As befitting of the famous princess maiden and former «Queen» candidate, to think such immense power could be drawn out."

Shao praised as she readied her fists in a stance.

However, Kamito could still discern composure in her expression.

"--However, compared to Linfa-sama, this is nowhere enough."

"...!?"

Instantly, the designs of the magic circles covering the ground were being overwritten with frightening speed.

It was like someone was dripping pitch black ink over a blank sheet of paper--

"...What is going on!?"

"The use of ritual magic to overwrite ritual magic. Linfa-sama was waiting all along for your princess maiden to finish her ritual dance performance!"

As Shao punched, Kamito blocked with the «Demon Slayer».

--What great force. Compared to before, her power had clearly increased. On the other hand, the divine power filling Kamito's body was continuously receding, causing the sacred sword's brightness to dim accordingly.

Not only did it render Fianna's completed ritual magic ineffective, this spell even rewrote it to empower the «Four Gods» instead.

"...What the heck, how could something so messed up be possible!?"

Kamito screamed as he desperately pushed back against Shao's weight. Even though he was completely unversed in ritual magic, Kamito knew that this was quite unreasonable.

Kamito's gaze traveled over Shao's shoulder.

In the distance, he could spot the figure of the dancing Quina Empire's princess, dressed in a dazzling rainbow-colored feathered robe.

"The divine beast spirit «Kirin»'s elemental waffe -- «Seraphim Feathers»."^[1]

Shao smiled smugly.

"That feathered robe amplifies Linfa-sama's powers greatly."

"...!"

Kamito smacked his lips as he glanced behind him.

(Damn it, Claire and the Ellis are also being dominated--)

"--Don't turn your gaze away in mid battle!"

Shao's «Divine Tiger Fangs» roared. Overwhelming force was about to crush him.

Kamito instantly stopped pushing back and dodged her attack.

"...What!?"

This unexpected move caused Shao's forward motion to miss its target, throwing her off balance.

"--I'm sorry but let me ready my stance once more."

Kamito reached into his uniform pocket and took out a small stone.

This was spirit crystal sealing a lightning spirit. After he infused a tiny amount of divine power via his fingertips--

Instantly, a dazzling flash of light erupted.

Part 5

"...What, how... Why...?"

Faced with the unbelievable phenomenon occurring before her eyes, Fianna collapsed onto her knees in surprise.

The magic circles of the «Oratorio» were overwritten in an instant.

"Fianna, what on earth happened!?"

Acting as her guard, Rinslet fired off freezing arrows of demonic ice as she called out.

However, this rain of arrows meant for pinning down the enemy was rapidly eliminated by the flaming demonic bird, the «Vermilion Bird».

Having obtained the blessing of the overwritten ritual dance performance, the divine beast spirits employed by the «Four Gods» were greatly powered up.

"Cough...!"

Fighting out front, Ellis was blown away and rolling on the ground.

Her chest armor was shattered while her torn open uniform was stained with blood.

"Captain!?"

"...Cough, sorry, I was careless..."

Ellis struggled to get up.

The spear tip of her wielded «Ray Hawk» was also damaged, causing the force of the winds to weaken.

"The «Four Gods»'s contracted spirits suddenly became stronger!"

Striking down the fireballs released by the «Vermilion Bird», even Claire was being forced back to the rear guard position.

Carrying Rion on its back, the fiery demonic bird raised its scythe-like neck to the maximum height.

"Hmph, so long as Linfa-sama continues cheering for us, we of the «Four Gods» are invincible!"

Raging scorching breath was released.

"Dance, I call upon the crimson flames of destruction -- «Hell Blaze»!"

The «Vermilion Bird»'s breath and Claire's spirit magic flames collided in midair.

"...No good, we're being overwhelmed!"

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»."

"--Evil winds, go and rampage!"

Even though Rinslet and Ellis also attacked simultaneously, the «Vermilion Bird» was empowered by the ritual dance performance and easily repelled the attacks.

"We can't hold out much longer... Fianna, please perform protective magic!"

Turning back, Claire suddenly stared in wide-eyed surprise.

Fianna was in a kneeling posture, her shoulders trembling.

"I'm... sorry..."

"...Fianna?"

"It's all my... fault..."

--A useless member of royalty. The completely worthless «Lost Queen».

All the merciless criticisms, which she had heard during the four years when she had lost the power of her spirit contract, now reverberated within her mind.

(Four years ago on that occasion, I also failed to stop that precious person of mine...)

And now, because her power was not enough, the team was facing imminent defeat--

Crimson flames in the form of a demonic bird were approaching. Even if she started performing defensive magic now it would be too late.

(Once again, I am...!)

Just as she was about to close her eyes--

The demonic bird's flames were deflected, resulting in a great explosion.

"Waaaaah!"

Blown away by the intense force of the explosion, Fianna's entire body was thrown against the ground.

"...W-What?"

Moaning, Fianna opened her eyes.

Over there was--

"It's too early to give up, Your Highness the princess!"

"Kamito-kun...!"

Standing there was Kamito, «Demon Slayer» in hand.

Part 6

"Everyone, are you all okay?"

Kamito glared at the «Four Gods» before them as he asked the girls.

"I'm okay... Is what I'd really like to say. It's really dangerous!"

Claire shrugged as she replied.

"All we can do is fight on..."

Kamito smiled wryly as he infused power into the «Demon Slayer».

His right arm was too numb to use at all. More urgently, he was going to lose consciousness from blood loss if he continued to move like this for a few more minutes. Also, the damage from Shao's Fist of Assassination still remained.

Shao Fu of the «White Tiger» cracked her knuckles with displeasure as she approached.

"You're terrible, Kazehaya Kamito. To think we were having so much fun together."

She must be complaining about the little trick he used as a delaying tactic.

"Unlike these young ladies of noble birth, I don't have much of an upbringing."

The «Four Gods» cautiously kept their distance. Not letting down their guard in the face of injured prey, their discipline truly befitted a renowned strong team.

(Well then, what should we do...)

Kamito calmly observed the four elementalists. Rao, Hakua and Rion were individually inferior to the ace Shao Fu. If they were engaged in blade dance one on one, Claire and the girls were most likely stronger.

(--However, the truly troublesome factor is these girl's teamwork tactics.)

Against a coordinated attack from all four members of the «Four Gods», even Kamito could not take them lightly.

(If I do it alone, it really is a bit challenging...)

Kamito glanced behind him.

Discovering his intention, Claire spoke up.

"Rinslet and I can still fight."

"Leave the support to us."

Rinslet nodded as well and readied her magic bow of ice.

Indeed, Kamito was no longer alone. He had trustworthy teammates now.

These comrades, worthy of protection, brought power to Kamito's sword even greater than any ritual dance performance.

"I'll leave Fianna to take charge of Ellis' treatment."

"Understood."

Ellis nodded vigorously.

"...Sorry, Kamito."

"Ellis, I will avenge you."

Comforting Ellis who was biting her lip out of regret, Kamito suddenly kicked the ground for a flying leap.

The first to react was Hakua of the «Black Tortoise». Bending over in a low stance, she swiftly approached.

Based on her movements, Kamito instantly discerned that she was also a user of the Fist of Assassination just like Shao.

The other three also ran over at different intervals, as if planning to attack wave after wave in succession to wear down his stamina -- However, the fact that they did not attack all at once actually provided Kamito with an opportunity instead.

Through the battle against Shao, his senses had already been sharpened to a very keen level.

Feeling something was awakening within his body, Kamito started to blade dance.

"O Earth, may thy roars resound -- «Earth Blast»!"

Hakua struck her shield against the ground. As the ground swelled up, numerous pellets of stone flew out. Even though it was not magic with particularly high damage, trying to block all the pellets with a sword was virtually impossible.

"Kamito, hurry and dodge!"

Claire swung Flametongue. The freely dancing crimson flames deflected all of the stone pellets.

Kamito instantly crossed the sandstorm sweeping across the ground.

The girl wielding the azure dragon blade rushed before him. Rao of the «Azure Dragon». Due to the effects of the ritual dance performance, the azure dragon blade's cutting edge had grown several fold.

As the gigantic azure dragon blade swept horizontally, Kamito bent over to evade the attack. Immediately, several arrows of ice flew over his head. It was Rinslet's cover fire.

"How foolish, to think you'd attempt to freeze a blade of water--"

"This is no ordinary ice -- Blossoming without waiting for winter, Ice Break!"

Instantly, the ice fragmented to produce a scatter shot, blowing Rao away.

Using this opening, Kamito instantly closed in.

"Don't think you can succeed!"

Hakua rushed before him, trying to block the sword's attack with her elemental waffe, the shield, however--

"Est, my apologies -- I will be using a slightly reckless skill!"

Kamito yelled out as he poured his entire body's divine power into «Terminus Est».

Spinning his body rapidly, he thrust the tip of the brilliantly radiant sword towards the shield.

An intense showering of sparks exploded. Even for the strongest sword spirit, trying to pierce with one strike a spirit specializing in defense was not possible.

However, the attack did not end there. Kamito momentarily released the sword--

"Absolute Blade Arts -- Sixth Form, Crushing Fang!"

Then he forcefully hammered his fist against the hilt of the sword.

Using the blade to transmit the impact -- this was a weapon breaking technique that belonged to the domain of unorthodox sword skills.

The «Black Tortoise»'s shield was shattered into particles of light. Hakua's eyes widened greatly.

Having shattered the shield, the sword's blade pierced Hakua's chest.

Damage to the body was instantly converted into psychological damage. Infused with immense divine power, this attack immediately rendered her unconscious.

"How dare you do that to Hakua!"

Emotionally distraught, Rao slashed with her weapon. At the same time, brandishing the crimson club, Rion attacked from the opposite flank. On the other hand, Shao charged in from straight forward with the «Divine Tiger Fangs» positioned at her waist.

Faced with simultaneous attacks from three directions--

"Absolute Blade Arts -- Third Form, Shadowmoon Waltz!"

Using one foot as a pivot, Kamito unleashed a spinning slash like a tornado.

Sparks flew all around. Spinning, slashing then turning again -- Kamito's sword danced madly like a tempest, shattering Rao's azure dragon blade and Rion's club at the same time.

"...Y-You weren't being serious just now!?"

Crossing the «Divine Tiger Fangs», Shao used its teeth to block Kamito's sword strike.

Her forehead broke out with cold sweat.

"I wasn't holding back out of mercy. However, it was your blade dance that awakened me."

Kamito found his limbs moving on their own accord. His body was recalling the sword skills he had used in the past as the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell.

"Impossible, for a single person to overwhelm us, the «Four Gods»..."

"Don't forget about me, «Flame Chain»!"

"And me too -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

The flaming whip and the arrows of ice attacked. Faced against repeated coordinated attacks from the Raven Class combo, even the «Four Gods»'s ace could not help but halt her movements.

Kamito kicked the ground to gain speed to follow up with an attack against Shao who had lost balance--

Suddenly, he felt a chilling presence from behind.

The presence appearing behind -- Rion of the «Vermilion Bird».

"Hmph, your shadow belongs to me now."

"...!?"

Kamito instantly spun around to release a slash, but Rion swiftly fled.

She seemed like she did not intend to attack.

(...What's going on?)

Even though doubts entered his mind, Kamito could not attend to them yet.

Using the momentum of the spinning slash, he was about to turn towards Shao.

"Tsk -- Roar of the Royal Fang!"

Shao unleashed the shockwave of wind towards Kamito's feet.

A deafening shockwave was heard. As a large amount of dust was swept up, Kamito's view was obscured.

Discovering her intent, Kamito instantly swung his sword to blow away the dust with the pressure--

But by the time the dust settled, the «Four Gods» had already retreated back to Linfa's location.

Shao panted painfully. Unconscious, Hakua was being carried in Rao's arms.

"Linfa-sama, as much as it pains me, let's retreat first for now."

Rao quietly advised.

"The «Four Gods» of the Quina Empire, retreating in the face of a second rate team?"

"Looks like our judgment was off. «Team Scarlet» is not some second rate team. Furthermore, that Kazehaya Kamito--"

"Is no ordinary lustful beast but a veritable monster. To be honest, I have little hopes of victory."

"Gununu..."

Linfu bit the sleeve of her ritual attire regretfully.

"L-Listen well and bear this in mind, Kazehaya Kamito! The next time we meet will be your time of death!"

Leaving behind such villainous dialogue, they fled.

"H-Hold it right there!"

"We're not going to let you escape!"

"W-Wait up..."

Kamito frantically called back Claire and the girls who wanted to pursue the «Four Gods».

"..? What? Why shouldn't we pursue at this time?"

"No, well you're not wrong... But my body, I'm reaching my limit..."

Groaning in spasms, Kamito collapsed to his knees.

Just as expected, using sword skills from before so forcibly, the strain on his body was immense.

"Kamito!?"

Claire rushed over frantically.

Stabbed into the ground, the sacred sword disappeared into the air and returned to its original form, a young girl.

"Kamito is always so reckless."

Est grumbled expressionlessly with her back towards Kamito.

Fianna had finished Ellis' emergency treatment and ran over, panting.

Taking out a piece of spirit crystal from her chest, she pressed it against Kamito's body. Even though it was only treatment of the lowest level, it had some comforting effects and could reduce pain to some extent.

"I'm sorry. It's all because my ritual dance performance ended up helping the enemy..."

"Don't let it weigh on your mind, Fianna, it's not your... fault..."

"That's right. An «Elemental Waffe» for amplifying a princess maiden's powers is absolutely too unfair!"

Even Claire who usually quarreled with Fianna all the time was comforting her.

However, Fianna's expression remained gloomy. Probably because her power did not help at all in this battle, she felt more or less responsible.

"By the way, the sword skills just now... Hey, Kamito!?"

Kamito's view suddenly went dark.

Hearing the worried voices of Claire and the rest, Kamito lost consciousness.

Part 7

"D-Damn it, damn it damn it damn it damn it~!"

The Quina Empire's princess, Linfa Sin Quina, was stomping her feet with chagrin.

To think the «Four Gods» would lose to a lower ranked team and had to escape into the middle of the forest.

Even though the result was a draw because no «Magic Stones» were lost, it was equivalent to defeat. Virtually all blade dances carried out within the grounds were visually observed by the visiting royalty and nobility through spirits sent out by the «Divine Ritual Institute». There was no doubt that the Quina Empire's reputation was going to be lowered greatly after this.

"...Damn it. Who was it that said they were a second rate team?"

"Based on their ranking within Areishia Spirit Academy, it is true that they are indeed lower than «Team Wyvern» and «Team Cernunnos»."

Shao grumbled as they walked. Rao answered as she carried Hakua on her back.

"...Oh well, ultimately, true strength can only be understood through actual combat. Looks like the rumor of them defeating the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» is not completely unfounded."

"...~Y-You people, why can you still remain so calm!?"

"Like I said, we haven't lost yet, right?"

"We have already fought with all our strength. Even if met with defeat, there are no regrets."

Faced with Linfa's tearful cries, Shao and Rao answered respectively.

"...Oh my, I agree wholeheartedly with Linfa-sama!"

Suddenly, Rion of the «Vermilion Bird», who had been walking silently so far, halted her footsteps.

"Rion?"

"For a highly renowned team, to think the «Four Gods» would lose so pitifully to a single person. If it were me, I'd be so ashamed I would never go back to my home country."

"...What did you say?"

Shao glared viciously at her as Rao frowned with surprise.

Normally, Rion would never say anything so instigating.

"Rion, please watch your behavior. Insulting companions is strictly prohibited... What are you laughing at?"

"Hmph, hmph..."

Rion's expression twisted malevolently.

"My apologies, Your Highness the imperial princess. Because you are all absolutely too stupid..."

Not only her tone but also her entire voice changed.

"Rion!?"

"Linfa-sama, hurry and leave!"

Rao and Shao jumped forward to protect the imperial princess.

Instantly, Rion's outline was distorted like a mirage--

Appearing there was a seductive beauty dressed like an erotic dancer.

"You are--"

"«Team Inferno»'s witch, Sjora Kahn!?"

Shao instantly equipped her elemental waffe and faced off against her.

"Y-You, what did you do to Rion!?"

"That impudent little mouse was taken care of, naturally. Oh well, killing her would cause disqualification, so I kept her alive♪"

"Bastard, you dared to deceive us ever since the imperial council yesterday...!"

Shao's «Divine Tiger Fangs» produced a roaring tempest.

"Hmph, well then..."

Sjora jeered and snapped her fingers.

"--Ladies of the «Four Gods», will you kindly hand over your «Magic Stones»?"

"...!?"

Suddenly, a swarm of innumerable oddly shaped creatures rushed forth from the forest.

An army of over a hundred demon spirits, grinding their teeth like ravenous beasts.

"To think you even set a trap--"

Protecting the cowering imperial princess behind her, Shao's voice expressed despair.

Part 8

--As a result, the tragic feast drew to a close in a matter of minutes.

"How unfortunate. As expected of the «Four Gods»'s ace, you're not that easy to take care of."

Sjora Kahn held the two newly acquired «Magic Stones» in her hand.

They were Rao and Hakua's. In order to buy time for Shao and the imperial princess to escape, Rao volunteered to sacrifice herself and retired from this stage of the «Blade Dance».

"Oh well, even though it was a stupid little drama, it was kind of fun for some entertainment on the side."

Sliding the «Magic Stones» into her chest, Sjora licked her lips.

Indeed, to the witch, preying on the «Four Gods» was simply like a pre-meal snack.

Her true plan was to seize initiative before the leader of «Team Inferno» -- the crimson-masked elemental.

To achieve this, Sjora had to steal that girl whom she wanted.

"The Demon King's successor belongs to our great Hierarch -- And his shadow is already in my possession."

Sjora snapped her fingers.

Then a pitch black human figure crawled out from her own shadow.

A humanoid puppet without a face -- the demon spirit «Baldanders».^[2]

In the past, it had been one of the spirits serving the Demon King Solomon. Expressly prepared by the Alphas Theocracy's «Snake» for this Blade Dance festival, the sealed spirit for Sjora Kahn's exclusive use.

«Baldanders»'s attribute was «Transformation». It had the ability to capture a target's shadow once. In addition to the elemental's appearance, even the contracted spirit's abilities could be emulated perfectly.

The reason why the divine beast spirit «Vermilion Bird»'s power could be harnessed, was due to this ability of «Baldanders».

"Hmph, I'm coming for you, «Darkness Queen»."

A faceless shadow trailing behind her, Sjora walked into the depths of the forest--

Chapter 6 - The Imperial Princess Kidnapped

Part 1

Bouncy. Bouncy.

"Mmm, hmm...?"

Kamito woke up to find himself surrounded by a soft and comfortable sensation.

His hazy field of view gradually expanded. This was apparently the interior of a tent.

(Right, I lost consciousness after the blade dance against the «Four Gods»...)

He was presumably carried back by Claire and the girls. In his hazy state of consciousness, Kamito thanked the girls in his heart.

As a result of using unfamiliar sword skills, his entire body's muscles became so stiff that he could not even lift his finger.

Bouncy. Bouncy.

Kamito was lying on something that resembled a luxurious sofa... Very comfortable.

(It feels like my head is being wrapped by something gently...)

Closing his eyes, a question suddenly arose in Kamito's mind.

(Wait a minute, did my tent ever have a sofa?)

Besides, that sort of thing could not possibly have been brought into the «Blade Dance» grounds.

(This sensation is actually...)

Kamito turned his body in puzzlement.

"...Ahnn!"

Immediately, the sweet scream brought his mind to full wakefulness.

"F-Fianna!? Woah..."

Due to his surprise, Kamito rolled off the bed, striking his elbow hard against the ground.

"Ouch..."

"A-Are you okay, Kamito-kun?"

Fianna opened her dusk-colored eyes wide and examined Kamito with a worried expression.

"...!?"

Before his eyes was a «Divine Ritual Institute» uniform with a bold low-cut design.

Kamito could not tear his gaze from the cleavage between those quivering breasts.

"Y-You, w-w-what were you doing..."

"What was I doing? Just a simple bosom pillow, To take care of Kamito-kun."

"What the heck is a bosom pillow? Isn't it normally a lap pillow!?"

"Because the bosom is softer than the lap, of course. Besides, Kamito-kun, you found it more comfortable too, right?"

"Uh..."

Kamito instantly became speechless. Indeed, the feeling just now was very comfortable. That soft bouncy sensation surely could not be experienced if it were simply someone's lap.

"Ara, do you have a fever? Your face is very red, you know♪"

"It's all your fault, Fianna, okay..."

Faced with the naughty imperial princess, Kamito replied stiffly.

Fianna smiled and stood up.

"I've already applied healing magic to the wound on your right arm, but the muscle pain probably will last for quite a while."

"I see..."

Kamito tried clenching both fists and relaxing. Immediately, he felt sharp pain. In his current state, he was probably still unsuited to using the sword skills from his Ren Ashbell days.

"Fianna, thank you for everything all this time."

Hearing Kamito's thanks, Fianna blushed.

"W-What are you saying? I'm the one who's been protected by you all this time, Kamito-kun. Just now, wasn't it you who protected everyone in the team?"

"It goes both ways. We are a team after all."

"But, I..."

Fianna bit her lip hard and lowered her gaze.

She seemed to be still upset about the blade dance earlier. For her trump card the ritual dance performance to be defeated, she must have suffered quite a blow as a result.

"Are you still concerned about just now--"

"Kamito-kun..."

Fianna spoke softly, then she suddenly leaned herself tightly against Kamito.

"Fianna?"

"I'm sorry, could you let me lean against you like this for a while?"

"...Yeah."

Looks like she's not teasing me as usual. Although Kamito could feel his heart racing nervously, he nodded silently.

Then Fianna leaned against him as if entrusting her entire body weight to Kamito.

Unique to girls' bodies, she felt very soft and gentle to touch. As her hair lightly brushed against Kamito's skin, it felt a little ticklish.

"There's an injury here too."

"...!?"

Kamito suddenly felt a sense of pleasure that made his body tremble.

Fianna was using the tip of her tongue to lick Kamito's collarbone.

"Th-This kind of wound only needs two licks of saliva, okay!"

"Then allow me to help you... Hmm, smooch..."

Fianna licked the wound as if sucking away while she chanted a spirit language incantation.

Her teeth lightly brushed against his skin, causing ticklishness. It almost felt like she was taking a gentle bite.

"...Mmm, don't, move... Smooch..."

"W-Wait, wait a minute! What if someone sees us doing this--"

Just as Kamito yelled out--

...Clonk. Tumble tumble tumble tumble.

A can rolled before Kamito's eyes.

...A can of peaches.

Kamito frantically looked up.

Standing at the tent entrance was Claire with canned food in her arms.

"Y-You, y-y-y-you, what are you two doing?"

Rumble rumble rumble...!

The twintails stood up vertically like blazing flames as the surrounding temperature rapidly rose.

"C-Claire, it's not what you think, this is--"

"Ara, I am treating Kamito-kun's wounds. I hope you won't disturb us."

Fianna answered rather defiantly.

Moosh. Kamito found his face suddenly pressed between those soft breasts.

"Uwah... Fugu... Fianna, I-I can't breathe..."

"W-What are you doing!? H-How could you be so shameless!?"

"Oh dear, I am quite embarrassed about this too. But there's no other way. Because of Kamito-kun's body, magic cannot take effect unless this kind of method is used."

"U-Umm..."

Although the reason was unclear, it was a known fact that Kamito's body repelled holy magic and required unusual methods -- namely, ritual magic for healing had to be performed while their bodies were pressed tightly together.

Because Claire also knew about this condition, she could not scold them without good reason.

Filled with chagrin, Claire howled.

"I-In that case then let me perform the healing magic! Because Kamito is my slave spirit!"

...Claire was not making any sense.

"Healing magic whatever... I thought you only knew how to use fire type spirit magic?"

Other than simple spells like illumination, in principle, spirit magic could only be used if it belonged to the same category as the contracted spirit's attribute.

...If my memory serves me right, the fire type category should not have any healing spells.

"Cauterization of wounds is still possible!"

"Isn't that emergency treatment for the battlefield -- anyway, you're going to incinerate me into charcoal for sure!"

Kamito retorted without any hesitation.

"Claire, you should know that Kamito-kun is injured. If you're just going to interfere with my taking care of Kamito-kun, then please leave."

"...~!"

Reprimanded by Fianna, Claire's eyes began to fill with tears.

"I-I know, okay, jerk--!"

...Crying, Claire ran away noisily.

At the tent entrance, a large number of canned peaches lay fallen, rolling about on the ground.

Kamito picked up the cans as he softly muttered to himself.

"Did she come here to visit me..."

The imperial princess sighed.

"...Just now, maybe I bullied her too much?"

"Oh well, I'm glad to be saved from being burned into charcoal."

"Kamito-san, dinner is ready!"

Presently, Rinslet's voice was heard coming from outside the tent.

Part 2

Night was falling as the sun began to set. The sound of cutlery colliding could be heard.

Kamito tried to speak to Claire as he helped lay the table.

"U-Umm, Claire..."

"What's the matter, perverted slave?"

"Well, thank you for worrying about me just now."

As Kamito scratched his head and spoke, Claire's hair jumped slightly.

"Hmph, I wasn't worrying about you, jerk..."

Claire seemed to be blushing out of embarrassment.

"Fufu, today is quite a feast."

Rinslet plopped the pot onto the table with a thud, while her bosom shook from the impact.

This was Rinslet's specialty, Laurenfrost style hot pot cuisine.

Everyone gathered around and sat on the tree stumps around the table. The bubbling and boiling pot was heated by a burning red-hot spirit crystal under it. Beside the pot were large amounts of vegetables gathered from the forest, diced and quartered fish, as well as meat from hunted prey.

"...Hot pot eh. Looks really tasty."

Because the soup was already boiling, Kamito intended to put the meat in, but at this moment--

"Kamito-san, what are you doing!?"

Rinslet smacked Kamito's arm soundly with a spoon.

"Ouch... W-What's wrong, we can't put it in yet?"

"Slower cooking ingredients like root vegetables should be added first. A hot pot requires balance."

Rinslet glared severely at Kamito with her adorable eyes of emerald.

Kamito discreetly spoke to Claire beside him.

"S-Somehow it feels like Rinslet's personality changed?"

"She's always been like this, as soon as it's hot pot time, she likes to show off..."

"Hot pot is indeed a simple method of cooking, but exactly because it is simple, it is profound. Do not look down on the Laurenfrost's traditional hot pot cuisine!"

Lady Rinslet crossed her arms and stared at everyone.

...In that posture, she resembled some kind of hot pot guardian.

"Kamito, I want to eat fish soon."

Est tugged at Kamito's sleeve and said.

"Well, just leave it to Rinslet."

Kamito smiled wryly as he rubbed Est's head.

Rinslet added meat and vegetables to the pot with well-trained motions.

Kamito and the rest swallowed their drool as they watched Rinslet in action.

"Okay everyone, let's start!"

Finally receiving the okay from the guardian, Kamito reached out to the pot with his chopsticks.

The soup base was not made from ordinary water but Rinslet's specially concocted medicinal soup.

The delicious aroma helped stimulate appetites. As Kamito bit into a piece of cooked meat, delicious juices filled his mouth, producing an indescribable sense of happiness that began spreading from his heart.

"Wow, this is really tasty!"

"Hmph, naturally!"

Rinslet puffed her chest out with pride.

All the young ladies were enjoying the delicacies as they blew on their food to avoid burning their mouths.

"Wait, Claire, I was planning on giving Scarlet that piece of meat!"

"Hey, stop deciding on your own to feed my contracted spirit!"

Ellis and Claire squabbled as their chopsticks engaged in a blade dance over the pot. Beneath the table, their contracted spirits were waiting for scraps.

"Hey, hey, what's this?"

Fianna frowned as she poked a mysterious bouncy ingredient sitting at the bottom of the pot.

Kamito was also very intrigued.

"This is called beancurd. It's like pudding that's made from coagulated soybeans. I heard that it comes from Kamito's homeland, so I researched it in books and tried making it."

"This is a specialty from my homeland...?"

Kamito's childhood memories were very hazy. Because ever since he could remember, he was receiving assassin training at the «Instructional School».

All he knew was that his homeland was an island country on the eastern border, one that did not even have a name.

But no matter what, simply from her well intentions in making this dish specially for Kamito were extremely gratifying for him.

"Rinslet, thank you."

Kamito scooped out what appeared to be very elastic pudding as he thanked Rinslet.

"I-It's not like I made it specially for you alone, Kamito-san!"

Trying to hide her embarrassment, Rinslet looked especially cute as she curled her hair around her finger repeatedly.

"...Huff."

Kamito tried a bite slightly nervously.

"Woah, this is really good!"

With a smooth texture and rich taste, it really was quite delicious.

"I will try it too... Ah, it really is!"

"...What amazing texture. I've never had anything like it even in the imperial capital."

Est seemed to be enjoying it particularly, expressionlessly mumbling to herself "bean~curd, bean~curd..." as she ate the beancurd with relish.

"Come on people, th-this was made for Kamito-san!"

"Hmm..."

Ellis, who had been eating the beancurd silently, suddenly widened her eyes in surprise.

"What's wrong, Ellis?"

"N-No, umm, I just suddenly noticed..."

Faced with Kamito's question, Ellis blushed and stuttered.

"Hmm?"

"E-Eating hot pot together, umm... D-Does it not constitute as indirect kissing?"



"...!?"

Faced with Ellis' sudden statement--

All the girls around the table instantly froze.

"Hey hey, what are you talking about, that kind of thing--"

Kamito made a wry expression as he waved his hand and spoke.

"Y-Yeah, y-yes that's right, th-this level, i-i-indirect kiss whatever...!"

"R-Really, r-really, you're over thinking things!"

...But everyone's face had gone bright red as they frantically avoided eye contact with Kamito.

(I-I see. Since all the girls are pure and innocent high-class ladies, they are very concerned about that...)

...Kamito felt his feelings being slightly hurt.

--After this, the lively meal came to a close.

Claire quietly put down her spoon, cleared her throat and spoke up.

"Everyone should already know, there are only two days left in the «Blade Dance». If you don't want any regrets, then let's fight by giving it all we've got."

"Hmm, yes."

"Yeah, we definitely won't give up on winning."

Indeed, the endgame was about to begin. In order to seize the initiative in the competition for the few remaining «Magic Stones», they needed to attack teams who were holing up defensively in their «strongholds».

Furthermore, this applied to other teams as well.

Very likely, an even more intense blade dance was imminent.

"..."

Kamito suddenly noticed the gloom in Fianna's expression.

"Fianna, are you okay?"

"Uh yeah, well enough... I just seem slightly tired."

"Well, ritual dancing is very exhausting."

"You should lie down on the bed and rest."

Despite quarreling with Fianna earlier, Claire now offered care and concern.

On further thought, Fianna's exhaustion was only natural. After the ritual dance performance at the blade dance against the «Four Gods», she had to use up divine power to heal Kamito.

Magic for recovering fatigue did indeed exist, but it was only a temporary effect obtained from the blessing of spirits. Hence, the fundamental solution was still restful sleep.

"...Yeah. I should go rest as you all suggested. I'm done with my meal."

Fianna stood up quietly and headed to the tent.

Part 3

After dinner, Kamito was helping Rinslet wash the utensils and cutlery at the riverside.

Claire and Ellis had gone off for patrols while Est was playing with Scarlet.

"Since you're injured, Kamito-san, you can go take a break, it's fine."

"It's just dish washing so it won't be a problem at all. As for you, Rinslet, wouldn't a classy lady like you get your beautiful hands wrinkled if you keep washing dishes like this?"

"Fufu, don't worry. My skin won't be wrinkling. Do know that I am Rinslet the Ice Demon, the one with great relations with water spirits."

So that was what was going on. The wooden bucket where she immersed her hands was filled with purified light while an elastic gel-like spirit was washing the utensils thoroughly.

"How's Fianna's condition?"

"Just now, Claire went to pick some herbs which are very effective for eliminating fatigue."

"That girl seems to become inexplicably hardworking whenever someone gets sick or injured."

Claire was clearly ordering Kamito around like a slave all the time, but whenever he got hurt in school matches or anything like that, she always visited him and brought canned peaches.

"Hmm, she's actually good at taking care of others in certain ways. Back in the Academy, she often took care of stray cats in the neighborhood. It probably stemmed from her childhood when she had to frequently take care of Rubia-sama who was always chronically sick in bed."

"I see..."

...Oh well, that was not surprising.

Kamito also knew that Claire was a benevolent child at heart despite her lack of forthright honesty.

"...By the way, aren't you childhood friends with Claire, Rinslet?"

"Well, even though we often played together when we were young... H-However, we simply share inseparable fates that intersected a long time ago."

"Did you two quarrel a lot when you were small?"

"No... Back then, she was a shy crybaby."

Kamito pressed his finger against his temple.

"...I can't picture it at all."

"She began to change after Rubia-sama's incident."

Rinslet explained as she directed her gaze towards the bucket.

"Rubia Elstein."

The «Calamity Queen» who betrayed the Fire Elemental Lord and disappeared without trace.

Claire hoped to realize through the Blade Dance festival her «Wish» to find out the truth of what happened four years ago.

Also, there was the question of where her elder sister had vanished to--

"That girl is actually suffering from many things..."

Kamito muttered to himself as he looked down at the moon's reflection in the river.

"...Uwah!"

In the middle of doing the dishes, Rinslet suddenly released a cute sounding scream.

"What happened!?"

"Yah... Ah... Th-The water spirit, it went into my clothes...!"

"What!?"

Kamito's eyes widened with surprise.

The rubbery elastic water spirit was crawling over Rinslet's arm, squirming into her uniform.

"Yah, so ticklish, ah..."

Inside the wet uniform, the water spirit was twisting around randomly.

It looked like it meant no harm but was simply trying to act friendly with Rinslet.

"It seems to like you."

"E-Enough of this, Kamito-san, stop staring and help me instead... Uwah!"

Rinslet pleaded to Kamito with tears in her eyes.

"G-Got it!"

(...Oh well, in this kind of situation it must be tough for her to attempt to control the spirit.)

Kamito frantically reached out and tried to grab the squirming spirit.

Boing boing. Boing.

"O-Okay, I caught it!"

"Mmm, uwah!"

Just as Kamito felt something soft against his fingertips, Rinslet made a sweet sounding scream.

The water spirit wriggled in Kamito's hand, going boing boing.

"Seriously, stop moving randomly!"

Boing boing.

"Fuah... K-Kamito-san, not that!"

Instantly, the water spirit jumped out from Rinslet's chest.

...Then bouncing on the ground, it fled towards the river.

"Sigh, what a naughty spirit..."

Kamito shrugged wryly--

Then he immediately noticed a serious problem.

(...Hmm? Then what am I currently grabbing in my hand?)

Boing boing.

"...Mmm, ah!"

"S-Sorry!"

...Kamito finally realized what he was grabbing and frantically withdrew his hand.

"I-I didn't do it on purpose, really -- uwah!"

Something icy cold flew past Kamito's neck.

...An arrow of ice.

Woosh...!

Freezing wind was blowing at Kamito who felt like his skin was about to be frozen.

"Fu, fufu, fu... Kamito-san, have you prepared yourself?"

Smiling, Rinslet aimed her magic bow of ice towards the dead center of Kamito's brow.

Part 4

Beneath the moonlit forest, Fianna was standing all alone.

Recalling the blade dance against the «Four Gods» this morning, Fianna could not help but sigh.

(...I must become stronger. I don't want to be everyone's burden any longer.)

If her current state persisted, she was unworthy of participating in blade dance with her teammates.

Fianna felt spurred by such anxiety.

(Today's unsightliness will never repeat a second time. For no reason other than the fact that I shall not permit myself to make the same mistake...!)

Fianna mentally shook her head to clear her thoughts, then reached towards the ground with both hands.

Her face did not display her usual composure.

"Thou, servant of the king of the child of man, knight and master swordsman! By the contract of the old blood, become the sword that protects me, come forth and do my bidding--"

Fianna quietly exhaled and solemnly chanted the ritual to summon her contracted spirit.

Immediately, the knight spirit's figure appeared in the magic circle drawn on the ground.

Bathed under moonlight, the silver-white armor shone brilliantly. The knight bowed his head as if serving a queen.

The knight spirit, «Georgios», was of course a very powerful spirit. However, in order to fully harness the spirit's power, it was necessary to release the spirit in the form of an «Elemental Waffe».

(If only I could use an «Elemental Waffe»--"

If only she could release an elemental waffe that surpassed the «Seraphim Feathers» of the «Four Gods»'s imperial princess Linfa Sin Quina, then Fianna would be able to contribute more to the team's combat potential.

Fianna resolved herself, shutting her eyes to perform the releasing chant of the elemental waffe.

However, she was already in an exhausted state.

Even so--

"Thou shalt be my sword, thou shalt be my shield, with unlimited towering light, purify and exorcise those belonging to darkness--"

The knight spirit's armor shone as it disappeared into particles of light in the air.

Fianna could feel an astounding amount of heat enveloping her outstretched fingertips while sharp pain crept throughout her body.

"...Owww... Ah...!"

Despite the pain that distorted her face, Fianna continued to grit her teeth and endure.

At this moment -- something shaped like a sword instantly appeared in her hand.

(...Success!?)

Just as Fianna felt delight in her heart...

The brittle sound of glass shattering could be heard in the next second as the sword of light in her hand fragmented into pieces.

"--Yah!"

Fianna was sent flying by the shockwave and slammed hard against the ground.

".....Ooh...!"

Fianna frowned heavily from the pain. Looking down to examine her hands, she found them covered with severe burns.

"Why, why...!"

Fianna hammered the ground with her bleeding fists.

"If this continues, I am not worthy of fighting together with everyone--"

--Suddenly, a rustling sound could be heard from the shaking thicket behind her.

"...!"

Fianna looked back in surprise--

"...Goodness gracious, I knew you were acting a bit strange, so that's what's going on."

"Claire..."

Claire was gazing sharply at her from behind.

"...Why are you here?"

"I was planning on bringing you some herbs for reducing fatigue but saw you leaving the tent. I found it strange so I followed."

"..."

"I was puzzling over what you were trying to do -- So it turns out you're forcing a release of an «Elemental Waffe». Are you aware of how dangerous that is?"

Claire rushed over to her and spoke with a severe expression.

"The «Elemental Waffe» isn't something that can be trained to use overnight. Forcibly trying to use a spirit according to your will doesn't work because the elemental waffe is supposed to be the optimal equipment manifested after the contracted spirit has completely opened its heart to the elemental. Plus the fact that you only recovered the power of your spirit contract not too long ago, you should be trying to gradually strengthen your bonds with your spirit instead!"

As members of the nobility who served the imperial family, Ellis and Rinslet were bound by etiquette to hold back on what they could say to Fianna the imperial princess. But since Claire's family had been stripped of their title, she could afford to speak with complete candidness and lack of tact.

"I-I don't need you to teach me that, Claire."

Fianna retorted defiantly.

She understood very well that Claire truly cared and was concerned about her. Nevertheless, she still felt a sense of opposition arise naturally.

"I get the feeling you're overly anxious but there's no need to force yourself to get stronger immediately. Fianna, your ritual dance performances are already very dependable and besides, don't we have Kamito? In any case, he is still extremely strong--"

"Then you intend to keep depending on Kamito-kun?"

Fianna interrupted sharply.

"What, that's not what I said."

"I have no wish of being the dainty princess who can only be protected by the person I love."

Fianna quietly shook her head.

"--I love Kamito-kun."

And issued a direct challenge to Claire.

"Hence I want to become strong -- strong enough to stand by his side on the battlefield."

"I-I see..."

Claire showed a wavering expression. Although Fianna never hid her affections for Kamito, expressing her intentions so directly was probably the first time.

"What about you, Claire?"

"...Eh?"

"Regarding Kamito-kun, what do you think, Claire?"

"W-Why do you have to ask that kind of question? It has nothing to do with anything!"

Claire blushed and began to panic.

"I want to hear what you think, Claire... Do you love Kamito-kun, Claire?"

Rather than speaking with her usual playful tone of voice, Fianna's words were as sharp as knives.

"..."

Claire was completely shocked.

Then as if trying to avoid Fianna's gaze, she suddenly shifted her gaze away.

"N-Nothing of that sort. As if anyone would be that stupid!"

"But when Kamito-kun went missing after falling off the cliff, you cried out his name for who knows how many times during your dreams."

"I-I was just sleeping in a daze, K-Kamito and I are not--"

"...Is that so? I get it."

Fianna quietly shook her head and turned around to leave.

"Hey, wait there, you, I'm not done yet--"

As if cutting off Claire's calls to Fianna, the trees and leaves closed up like a door.

Part 5

(...I went completely overboard, huh. What an utter mess.)

Fianna walked rapidly through the forest as she sighed with regret.

Involuntarily, she had reprimanded others with excessive severity.

...When clearly Claire was worrying about her sincerely.

(How childish of me to make matters like this. I must apologize to her later.)

Just as Fianna thought this to herself, she suddenly realized.

(...But isn't this something that cannot be helped?)

Precisely because she said that to Claire, Fianna finally became aware of her innermost feelings.

And discovered what she truly felt.

(...Indeed, I am being anxious.)

But this was not simply because she did not want to burden the team.

As much as she wished to use that reason as cover...

In actual fact, her intentions were nowhere near that noble.

(...How unsightly of me, to think I would be jealous of those girls.)

Claire, Ellis, Rinslet, as well as Est--

Kamito was surrounded by attractive girls.

They were trusted by Kamito and able to guard his back.

(But me...)

Fianna stopped walking.

The clear chilling wind of the night blew across her burning cheeks, helping her mind to cool off and calm down.

"...I should return to the tent."

Many unsavory spirits roamed the forest at night.

Even though Fianna was currently within the barrier, one could not assert that she was absolutely safe.

Suddenly, a beast's terrifying barking noises came from afar, causing Fianna to tremble.

(Come to think of it, the first time I met Kamito-kun, it was also in a forest like this...)

At the time, Kamito had saved Fianna from a berserk dryad's assault, back when he was active as Ren Ashbell, the «Strongest Blade Dancer».

(...That was my first love.)

Lubdub. Fianna could feel her heart beat getting faster.

(...Th-That's right. The first one to fall in love with Kamito-kun is me.)

--Just at this moment.

"So you're here, Fianna."

"Eh?"

Fianna looked up with surprise.

"...Kamito-kun?"

Appearing by her side was the youth she had just been thinking about.

"...W-Why did you come here?"

"I came to look for you, Fianna. The forest at night is quite dangerous."

"I-I don't need you to worry about me."

Fianna instantly blushed.

"Hey Fianna, do you have some free time right now?"

"...? Hmm, yes, a little. Why?"

Did the wounds treated earlier this morning rupture again?

"Let's take a walk for a while. Look over there. Isn't there a beautiful spring? When it's nighttime, glowing water spirits will gather."

"...U-Ummm, is this..."

Fianna held her breath for an instant then continued.

"...Are we going on a date?"

"Hmm, a date eh... Well, I suppose."

Kamito wryly shrugged.

It was the very first time for Kamito to extend such an invitation... Fianna could feel her heart racing.

"H-However..."

Fianna instantly calmed down and shook her head.

"No, it would be dangerous to leave the «Barrier». Even though it's quite a shame--"

After all, the «Blade Dance» was currently in progress. No amount of risk was worth taking no matter how small.

"It's okay, I'm here with you."

Kamito smiled gently as he extended a hand towards Fianna.

Despite the dissonance of witnessing such a rare gentle expression from Kamito, Fianna found the gaze of his jet black eyes causing her thoughts to become hazy as if a layer of fog was floating in her mind.

(Indeed, being together with Kamito-kun would surely be quite safe...)

Kamito was surrounded by many attractive girls. This caused Fianna a sense of confusion.

If she missed this opportunity, another one might not arrive again.

(...On occasion, it should be fine to act according to my feelings in a forthright manner, right?)

"Very well. Just for a little while should be okay."

Fianna made her decision, took Kamito's hand and walked forward.

"By the way, shouldn't we tell Claire and the others that we are going out?"

"Hey hey, this is rare chance for a date. There's no need to tell that bunch of people, right?"

"...Eh?"

Instantly, Fianna brought her steps to a sudden stop.

--The dissonance she felt starting from a while ago was transformed into decisive fact by a single statement.

"Let go!"

Fianna cried out shrilly and shook off Kamito's hand.

"W-What's the matter, Fianna!?"

"...Who are you?"

"What?"

"Kamito-kun would never call our comrades 'that bunch of people,' absolutely never!"

Fianna glared coldly at the youth before her eyes--

This was merely someone taking on Kamito's appearance.

"...Fufu, I see."

The youth's tone of voice -- no, the entire voice became completely different.

"I even attempted to use a bit of mental manipulation magic... But the result is still a failure."

Immediately, Kamito's figure distorted to take on a girl's appearance.

Vivid blue hair. An erotic outfit like an exotic dancer's.

She was a beautiful girl. However, her face gave off an impression like a poisonous flower.

Her ominous red eyes swept over Fianna's entire body as if they belonged to a snake eyeing its prey.

"...!?"

"--I have come to welcome you, «Darkness Queen»."

In that instant, the girl released a flash of lightning from her fingertips--

Thereby Fianna lost consciousness.

Chapter 7 - The Witch's Strategy

Part 1

"Man, what rotten luck..."

After suffering from Rinslet's frozen treatment, Kamito was preparing to return to the tent.

"...Eh?"

Just by chance, he happened to spot Claire exiting the forest.

Her hair, styled into twintails, were standing on end like a blazing fire. Behind her, Scarlet was chasing its master as if trying to keep her master's mood under observation.

(...Well, the fact that she's in a bad mood is easy enough to understand.)

Smiling wryly, Kamito approached Claire.

"Hey, Claire--"

"Uwah, K-Kamito!?"

Turning her head back in response, Claire blushed and screamed as soon as she saw Kamito's face.

"W-What? Stop scaring me!"

"What do you mean? It was just a normal greeting."

"Sh-Shut up, I-I don't feel that way about you--"

Blushing to her ears, Claire suddenly turned her face away.

(...What's going on?)

...Although Kamito was not quite sure what was going on, Claire behaving strangely was nothing new anyway.

"How's Fianna's condition?"

"Hmph, how would I know? That perverted princess whatever."

"Did you quarrel again?"

"..."

Claire pouted, her face still turned away.

Kamito sighed helplessly... Oh well, these two girls quarreling was nothing new either.

The two continued walking side by side for a while--

"Hey, Kamito..."

Claire suddenly spoke up.

"What?"

"This morning when we engaged the «Four Gods» in blade dance, you were using her sword skills again, right?"

"...What, you're repeating the same subject from yesterday again?"

Despite his shock and surprise, Kamito continued to retort defiantly.

...Clearly her suspicions have not been dispelled completely.

"I'm not talking about that. Otherwise, we'd end up arguing all over again."

"It's nothing serious anyway."

Kamito replied calmly.

"Seeing what happened during that blade dance, it got me wondering. Is it possible that we have become your shackles? Perhaps you'd be able to perform at full capability if you fought alone, like Ren Ashbell, the «Strongest Blade Dancer» three years ago. Stuff like that."

"..."

Claire's eyes were serious.

Kamito could not figure out exactly why she was asking about this.

Most probably, it was a subject brought up during her quarrel with Fianna just now.

Yesterday, Fianna had also agonized over the same issue.

"|--"

Just as he was about to say something, Kamito hesitated.

What he needed to say were not words of comfort.

Hence, he had to consider carefully before he came up with words to say.

(My past self would definitely give a different answer compared to now...)

In the past, Kamito undoubtedly pursued power as an individual.

Back then, he had thought of it as only logical. After all, having people that required protection would cause one to be weak.

Only by eliminating the need to protect anyone or anything would a person brave enough to lay down his own life become the most powerful. That was what was taught at that insane facility.

However, things were different now.

(Precisely because of my comrades fighting by my side have I been able to become this strong.)

This was something he discovered for the first time only after enrolling in the Academy and meeting Claire and the girls.

Even the darkness spirit who had taught Kamito everything he knew had not succeeded in achieving this.

Raising his bowed head, Kamito spoke up.

"The existence of teammates have made me stronger. This is my entire power now. If I were alone, I definitely could not have defeated that «Nepenthes Lore»."

This was neither a lie nor modesty but his sincere feelings.

"Kamito..."

Claire clenched her fists tightly before her chest.

Those bright clear eyes of hers, resembling flawless rubies, seemed mildly moistened... Apparently.

"I-It feels kind of embarrassing, this way..."

"Y-Yeah..."

Who knew who started it, but the two of them started avoiding eye contact.

"...But anyway, thanks."

"What's the matter, for you to be so honest for once?"

"Sh-Shut up and turn into charcoal!"

With just some slight teasing, Claire was back to form.

(...Oh well, that's the way it should be.)

Kamito smiled wryly to himself.

"Hmm, what are you two doing over there!?"

Suddenly, Ellis arrived from the air via «Flight» magic.

Landing on the ground with a thud, she rapidly made a thrust with her sword towards Kamito's neck.

"Kamito, what sort of outrageous act did you commit again?"

"What the heck are you talking about? I never do anything like that!"

"Th-That's right. I-Indecency, nothing of that sort was being done!"

"What, to think you would mention indecency?"

"Claire, saying something like that while blushing would only cause misunderstandings!"

Hearing Kamito's snide remark, Claire awkwardly turned away from Ellis.

"By the way, Ellis, did something happen on your watch?"

Kamito did not think the serious and hardworking captain of the knights would simply cast her duties aside.

...Something must have happened.

"Ah yes, just now a wind spirit reported--"

Ellis switched to a serious expression and waved to summon a petite spirit in her service.

It was a translucent spirit shaped like a butterfly.

"Apparently, Her Highness the imperial princess has exited the «Barrier»."

"Fianna?"

"What did you say!?"

Kamito and Claire cried out in surprise simultaneously.

The forest at night was extremely dangerous. Fianna should know that very well.

"Why would this happen..."

Halfway through her question, Claire suddenly opened her eyes wide.

"Could it be because she quarreled with me...?"

"No, Fianna wouldn't act like that... It's not like she's you, Claire."

"Wh-What the heck!?"

Kamito decided to ignore Claire's pouting.

"But what is going on? Entering the forest alone is really--"

"...Apparently she did not go alone."

"Huh?"

"Apparently, Her Highness the imperial princess went out into the night forest together with Kamito."

"....."

This statement brought forth a lengthy silence.

".....Huh?"

"L-Like I said, Her Highness the imperial princess was together with Kamito!"

Ellis glared sharply at Kamito as she screamed.

"Kamito, y-you..."

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

Claire's crimson hair blazed like a great fire.

Kamito felt like there was some kind of bizarre misunderstanding -- or more accurately, he had been framed.

"W-Wait a minute, don't you find this is too weird!?"

Kamito frantically protested.

"Until just earlier, I was helping Rinslet with the dishes."

"...Hmm, that's true now that you mention it. I only parted ways with Fianna just a short while earlier."

"Then the Kamito that the wind spirit saw was..."

Realizing the strangeness of the situation, the two girls puzzled with their heads tilted.

"--Say, if this is really true, then this is a very serious situation, yes?"

"...Indeed, this is even worse than if she went out alone."

Nodding, Claire pondered with her hand supporting her chin.

"If that is the case, then someone disguised as Kamito had taken Fianna outside the barrier. Due to bearing Kamito's appearance, the spirits on watch did not react."

"In other words, Her Highness the imperial princess was kidnapped? But even if appearances were altered using spirit magic I do not think it is possible to neutralize the «Barrier»'s alarm."

"In principle, yes, but do remember this is the «Blade Dance» where elite elementalists gather from various countries. It won't be surprising even if there are magic users who can emulate appearances and even trick spirits."

"Even so, why would Fianna be singled out..."

Kamito muttered in deep thought.

--Completely incomprehensible, why she would be kidnapped.

Supposing «Magic Stones» were the aim, then hers could have been taken on the spot. Kamito had also thought of the other possibility of her being taken hostage as a bargaining chip, however--

(...That's too improbable. After all, the risk is too high.)

The «Blade Dance» was not a pure combat festival but a ritual ceremony for making offerings to the Elemental Lords.

If someone were to use despicable methods equivalent to defiling this fundamental principle, not only would they be condemned by all the spectating countries, they would even bring about the Elemental Lords' displeasure depending on the situation.

In actual fact, in the history of past «Blade Dance» festivals, there did exist cases when teams obtained victory through underhanded means, thereby bringing calamity upon their home countries.

"Anyway, let's go search for her! And call Rinslet too."

"Yeah."

Leaving Claire to find Rinslet, Kamito went to the tent to pick up Est.

Entering inside, Kamito found Est sleeping soundly on Kamito's bed.

"...Bean curd, bean curd~"

...Looks like she's having quite a wonderful dream.

It felt quite a shame to rouse her awake right now.

"Est, I'm sorry, it's time to get up."

"...Huah, Kamito, are we going out?"

Dressed in western style pajamas and still in a dreamy haze, Est rubbed her sleepy eyes and woke up.

"Yeah. Est, your power is essential."

Seeing Kamito nodding, Est woke up completely.

Without asking anything, she lightly held Kamito's hand.

"--I am your sword. Your will be done."

Est's cute body was enveloped by particles of light as she took on the form of a sacred sword in Kamito's hand.

"...Thanks, Est."

"Kamito, everyone has gathered. Are you ready?"

Claire and the girls had converged before the tent.

"I've heard what happened already. Leave the tracking to Fenrir."

By Rinslet's side, the white wolf howled.

"...Next, I think it's better if we split into two teams."

"Good idea. Then Rinslet and I will search the west side while Kamito and Ellis take the east. Violent spirits roam the forest at night, so be careful."

Claire gave clear and concise orders like a team commander. Combining Ellis' excellent tracking skills and Kamito's specialization in covert operations on one hand. Teaming up Claire and Rinslet together, on the other hand, offered substantial tracking ability from both members as well as excellent coordinated offensive capability. In this manner, Team Scarlet was split into relatively balanced sub teams.

Kamito nodded and began to sprint with Ellis through the night forest.

Part 2

...Drip.

Fianna woke and opened her eyes as result of the icy cold sensation of falling water droplets.

"Hmm, this place... is...?"

Still in a hazy state of consciousness, she swept her gaze back and forth across her surroundings.

This was a space enclosed by sturdy walls of rock. It seemed to be a natural cave.

Massive spirit crystals were arranged all around. The cave was illuminated by dim light.

"Why am I in a place like this..."

Fianna felt her head hurting sharply. Only when she tried to move her body did she notice.

Her hands could not move away from the wall of rock.

Fianna looked up in surprise to find her hands cuffed by metal shackles, pinned securely to the rock face.

"...Wait, what on earth is going on!?"

She struggled hard but achieved nothing except for ear-splitting noise from the shackles.

"R-Right, all I need to do is summon «Georgios»..."

Thinking that, she began to summon her knight spirit.

As the spirit seal on her chest shone with light, a magic circle's glow appeared by her feet--

"--Eh?"

But the magic circle suddenly disappeared.

As a sense of total exhaustion filled her body, the summoning «Gate» also closed.

"Why...?"

"Fufu, you have awakened, Your Highness the imperial princess."

Suddenly a voice was heard in the darkness.

"...!?"

"Although unfortunate, summoning your contracted spirit is indeed impossible. Because a sealing barrier has been erected in this place."

"You are..."

Appearing out of the darkness was the girl who had transformed herself into Kamito's form.

"Second-in-command of «Team Inferno» representing the Alphas Theocracy -- Sjora Kahn."

"Sjora..."

The elementalist who had sent out her familiar into Team Scarlet's barrier yesterday.

...Clearly, Fianna had become her captive.

"...!"

Fianna bit her lip hard.

(I became a burden to my teammates again...)

As Fianna's lower jaw shook out of chagrin, Sjora lifted it lightly.



"Fufu, what a great expression. It excites me so."

"...How regrettable, I have no value as a hostage. Sjora Kahn."

As tears appeared in her dusk-colored eyes, Fianna resolutely glared back at Sjora.

"Ara, then you are surely selling yourself short. As the «Calamity Queen»'s successor, you were chosen as the Flame Queen candidate."

Sjora jeered as if greatly amused as she drew her face near Fianna's ear.

"Be proud of yourself. You are the top candidate for the «Darkness Queen» who will be serving the Demon King, you know?"

"...Darkness... Queen...?"

The unfamiliar term caused Fianna to frown.

...It was an ominous sound which was sufficient to cause one to feel revulsion instinctively.

"Yes, Kazehaya Kamito -- the Demon King's successor awakened in this world. And then there is the «Darkness Queen» in charge of controlling him. Although little miss hell cat is also qualified as a candidate, that woman seems to prefer choosing you."

"...Kamito-kun is the Demon King's successor?"

"That's right. The savior our great Hierarch has been awaiting for over a thousand years."

--What on earth was she talking about? Fianna could not comprehend at all.

Even so, her instincts as a princess maiden alerted her that these were not simply delusional dreams.

(...Hell cat, that refers to Claire, right?)

"Hey, imperial princess. For the sake of our great Hierarch, I will bring the «Demon King» under my control. Neither that woman's, nor the darkness spirit's. Hence--"

With a rapturous expression, Sjora's tongue crept over Fianna's neck.

"...Yah!"

"...Whether your mind or your body, let them all become mine."

Sjora Kahn's fingertip slid across Fianna's neck to touch her forehead.

Instantly, Fianna felt her consciousness being eroded with a sense of being completely overwritten.

"...Ah... Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

If this continued, most likely she would be completely dominated from the core depths of her mind--

Hastily, Fianna severed her consciousness by her own willpower.

After all, training to protect one's mind was a required subject for all princess maidens at the «Divine Ritual Institute».

"Eh, as befitted the original Queen candidate. I knew it wouldn't be that easy to succeed."

Sjora distorted her lips cruelly as she muttered.

"--However, how long can you endure?"

Part 3

--Kamito and his teammates soon left the «stronghold» to search the forest.

The one who took Fianna away had not left behind any trails resembling footprints.

Tracking had to be left to wind spirits that served Ellis.

Ellis was currently conversing with a flock of butterfly-shaped spirits that had gathered on tree branches. Listening to the voices of wind spirits could be said to be her special skill.

Finally, Ellis stood up and walked towards Kamito.

"How is it?"

"Looks like no spirits in this area had seen those two."

"...Is that so? Then they probably didn't come here."

"However, given a skilled elemental, deceiving the eyes of spirits is nothing difficult. If that is really what happened, what we should do is track down the traces left behind by the usage of spirit magic but that is beyond the domain of wind spirits. My apologies."

"There's no need for you to apologize, Ellis. Speaking of which, I'm the one who can't do anything here."

Kamito shook ahead and disagreed with Ellis who was disheartened by her own excessive seriousness.

"But we are definitely out of ideas. Perhaps we should contact Claire and Rinslet on the west side."

"Hmm, that is true."

--Just at this moment.

Kamito suddenly sensed a presence.

"--Ellis, lie down now."

"...!?"

Taking Ellis' hand, Kamito pushed her against the ground.

"Wha... K-Kamito, this is not the time...!"

"Q-Quiet!"

"Oh no... B-But, th-the first time really should be done on the bed..."

Ignoring Ellis who mumbled with her face all red, Kamito focused his attention on observing the surrounding presences.

(...This is not a spirit but the presence of an elemental.)

While erasing his own presence, Kamito placed his hand on the «Demon Slayer».

Kamito's serious expression made Ellis stop talking.

The presence could be sensed across the thicket and was approaching them.

Most likely, the other party had already noticed Kamito and Ellis.

Was this just an opposing team patrolling at night? If possible, Kamito hoped that they could leave each other alone, but the other party seemed quite determined.

(If we get into an encounter battle right now...)

Even though there was little chance of losing, time was currently of the essence.

(...In that case, I will make the first move and finish it instantly!)

Kamito made his decision as he infused divine power into Terminus Est.

Silver-white light illuminated the dark night. Sensing the other party's momentary fear from the brightness, Kamito dashed into the depths of the thicket.

Pushing forward like a gale, he slashed with godlike speed.

The sound of metal clashing rang out as intense sparks scattered in the darkness of the night.

(...I was blocked!?)

Such reaction speed was not normal. The other person was clearly quite accomplished.

Furthermore, even though he had not used maximum power, the opponent had managed to survive the «Demon Slayer»'s attack after all.

(...Could it be, this person is!)

Illuminated by the sacred sword, the opponent's appearance finally entered Kamito's view.

The one who blocked Kamito's sword with one hand, equipped with gauntlets, was--

Her white hair particularly striking in the darkness, she was the girl with azure eyes.

"...Shao Fu of the «White Tiger»?"

"You are actually... Kazehaya Kamito?"

They both spoke at the same time.

"..."

"..."

For a brief period, they both maintained their elemental waffen in this engaged posture, not moving at all--

At this time, a series of footsteps was heard from deeper in the thicket.

"Shao, what on earth... Ah, y-you are--!"

The one who appeared was the «Four Gods»'s sovereign. Her Highness Linfa Sin Quina the imperial princess.

"Bestial king of lust Kazehaya Kamito! Why have you made your presence here!"

"B-Bestial king of lust, what the heck..."

Kamito slumped his shoulders as if completely drained.

...He felt like all vigor had been lost.

"Kamito, what on earth is going on..."

Pursuing from behind, Ellis also arrived.

Shao used her other arm to restrain Linfa.

"Linfa-sama, please stay back--"

"..."

Still wielding his sword in a stance, Kamito frowned.

(...This looks quite unusual.)

Why would the «Four Gods» leave their «stronghold» and appear in this place during a time like this?

Also, it was most unnatural for Linfa is have only Shao as her lone bodyguard.

"I did not expect to encounter you here..."

Shao gritted her teeth, as if intending to guard Linfa with her life.

(...Looks like something must have happened.)

Based on the situation, perhaps a pointless fight could be avoided.

"Hey, Shao, could you wait a little bit?"

"...Why?"

"To be frank, I have no intention of fighting. Your side should be the same, right?"

Saying that, Kamito slowly withdrew his sword--

"Yeah..."

With an expression of mild surprise, Shao relaxed from her combat stance.

...I knew it. Neither of us wanted to attack.

"Right now, I have no intention to battle you. If we can leave each other alone in peace, that would be a great help."

Reassured, Shao exhaled with relief.

...On further examination, Kamito found her dress torn and tattered, and she had numerous wounds on her arms and legs.

This damage were definitely not sustained during the blade dance this morning.

"For an elementalist of your level, who could have injured you to this level? Where are your other comrades?"

Hearing Kamito's question--

Shao bit her lip as if suppressing intense chagrin.

"The «Four Gods» have been vanquished. We fell into the witch's trap."

"...!?"

---Shocking words have been uttered.

Chapter 8 - Fiery Encounter

Part 1

Kamito and Ellis listened to Shao's story at a location not far from the encounter just now.

Despite the urgency of the search for Fianna, news regarding the witch who had defeated the «Four Gods» was too alarming. Allegedly, the «Four Gods»'s defeat stemmed from the witch disguising herself as one of their teammates, causing Linfa and the rest to fall into her carefully laid trap.

Taking on another's appearance to deceive others.

It was highly probable that this witch is the same person as the elementalists who kidnapped Fianna.

Kamito was just bending down to sit beside Linfa when she swiftly distanced herself as if running away.

She was really quite wary of him, even for someone on opposing teams.

(...But at least, she doesn't seem to be hurt.)

Linfa glared unerringly at Kamito.

"Hmm, Kazehaya Kamito, you intend to commit sexual assault upon me, is that what you are attempting?"

"As if anyone would do that! What on earth am I in your eyes?"

"Hmph, rumors about you have already spread to my country. Demon King Kamito's gaze is enough to seduce pure maidens, while a single touch of his fingertips is sufficient to make virgins pregnant!"

"What the heck are those rumors!? Am I a monster!?"

"K-Kamito, is that really true!? W-What should I do now, if I do not report immediately to my father--"

"Ellis, don't tell me you believe those rumors too!?"

...Somehow, it felt like rumors were not only spreading like crazy but also getting worse and worse.

"...Sigh, whatever. Let's hear the rest of your story."

Kamito sighed deeply and urged Shao to continue.

Shao nodded.

"That witch revealed herself after we retreated from the unfavorable blade dance against Team Scarlet."

Her face full of chagrin, Shao recounted how the «Four Gods» were wiped out.

During the blade dance against Kamito's team, Rion of the «Vermilion Bird» had apparently been replaced with the fake already. After revealing herself, the witch ordered several hundred demon spirits hidden in the forest to surround and attack the «Four Gods».

Having just engaged «Team Scarlet» in blade dance, the «Four Gods» were too exhausted to muster any decent resistance. Seeing that they were about to be hunted down, Rao of the «Azure Dragon» had voluntarily sacrificed herself to allow princess Linfa and Shao to escape--

"The one who had transformed into Rion was «Team Inferno»'s Sjora Kahn."

Shao uttered the name with agony.

"That girl, huh..."

It was the demon caster who had sent the snake into Team Scarlet's «Barrier» this morning.

(...Come to think of it, she was also particularly obsessed with Fianna at the time.)

Kamito recalled something mentioned about a «Darkness Queen» but what did it actually mean?

"Very likely, the one who took on Kamito's appearance and kidnapped Fianna is also that witch."

With a mysterious expression, Ellis murmured.

Kamito turned to face Linfa and Shao--

"...So, what are your plans from here on?"

"Hmph, the answer is obvious, fool!"

Whack. A thick branch struck Kamito on the head.

"Naturally, we must retrieve the «Magic Stones» the witch stole from our comrades. Rao, Hakua and Rion -- even though taking back the «Magic Stones» will not bring them back into the game, we must hold a memorial service for them at least."

"...Hold a memorial service? But they haven't died, right?"

Kamito remarked snidely with his eyes half narrowed.

"I want to retrieve their «Magic Stones» too. Although I do wish for vengeance, if this continues, we won't be able to win the «Blade Dance» festival."

"I-In that case, putting the mighty renown of our great empire out on the line, «Team Inferno» shall be vanquished!"

"I appreciate your vigor and conviction, but do you have the corresponding combat potential, current «Four Gods»?"

"Hmm, b-but..."

Linfa stammered at a loss for words.

...Clearly they did not have a plan either.

But in that case, this made negotiations easier. Gazing at the two girls alternately, Kamito spoke up.

"Hey, I've got a suggestion. How about we join forces?"

Regardless, their opponent was an elementalist under «Team Inferno» after all. The more allies, the better.

"Hmm... Join forces? With you?"

Linfa revealed a tactless expression of revulsion.

"I-In other words, y-you wish for me to satisfy your carnal desires?"

"W-What!?"

"That's completely wrong! Ellis, stop drawing your sword recklessly!"

Kamito clutched his head in exasperation.

"Linfa-sama, I believe agreeing to their suggestion would better serve our interests."

Unexpectedly, the one supporting Kamito at this time was Shao.

"Hmm, w-why!?"

"No matter what, if I had to do it alone, defeating that witch is truly a challenge. Furthermore, this guy here is not the atrocious immoral rogue king as rumored. Having engaged him in battle, I have realized this fact."

"Hmm, if Shao says so."

With great reluctance, Linfa finally nodded.

"Then it's decided. The alliance between «Team Scarlet» and «Four Gods» is hereby established."

Kamito and Shao bumped fists together.

"By the way, do you have any idea where Sjora Kahn is located?"

"Linfa-sama can use «Clairvoyance» so long as there is a shrine or a sacred spring. With that we can acquire the witch's movements."

"I remember «Clairvoyance» being the highest form of ritual magic... How impressive, despite being so small."

"Hmph, now you finally show some respect... Hmm, I am not small! Like you, I am sixteen years of age as well!"

The imperial princess roared tearfully as she noisily threw little pebbles at Kamito.

(...Hmm, definitely, Milla acts far more mature than her.)

"A shrine or a sacred spring eh -- Well then, let us return to the «stronghold» first."

Ellis suggested at this time.

"Yeah, I'll go call for Claire and Rinslet to return. Ellis, why don't you take these two back into the «stronghold»?"

"Yes, acknowledged."

Bidding Ellis and the rest goodbye, Kamito headed towards Claire and Rinslet.

Part 2

Meanwhile, the Raven Class combo of Claire and Rinslet were searching the forest on the west side.

Scarlet and Fenrir were tasked with searching for traces of Fianna's divine power.

"Looks like she definitely passed through here."

"Yeah. But it will very difficult to continue tracking from here. In any case, let's meet up with Kamito first."

Turning around to make their way back, Rinslet asked a question.

"So anyway, why were you quarreling with Her Highness the imperial princess?"

"It has nothing to do with you."

"...Could it be about breasts?"

"O-Of course not!"

Claire could not help but roar angrily.

"...Fianna seems quite troubled about this morning's blade dance."

She explained what just happened in the forest.

Obviously, all the parts related to Kamito -- were omitted.

"Carrying out «Elemental Waffe» releasing training on her own? That's way too dangerous!"

"That's right. However, it's not like I can't understand Fianna's impatience. Even for myself, I once went through a period of anxiety when I sought power in order to participate in the «Blade Dance»."

Claire recalled what happened two months earlier. Due to her excessive desire for power, the time when she made her bid for the dangerous sealed spirit.

(...Did Kamito ever go through such a phase?)

During the blade dance against the «Four Gods», he had exhibited overwhelming skills in blade dance.

Once that level of power had been achieved, there was probably no need for this sort of worrying?

...As soon as her thoughts turned to Kamito, it felt like she was unable to stay calm.

(Seriously, it's all Fianna's fault for saying that--)

In an attempt to cool her head which felt like it was on fire, Claire shook her head vigorously.

--I love Kamito-kun.

Back then, Fianna was not showing a mischievous expression like always.

(Those eyes of hers, it was as if she had made some sort of resolution...)

--At this very moment.

"What a coincidence. To think we'd meet here."

"...!?"

From the depths of the darkness came a voice, causing Claire and Rinslet to enter a battle stance.

(We failed to sense the other person's presence!?)

This particular fact caused Claire's instincts to raise quite an alarm.

"...Who is this!?"

With a shrill cry, Rinslet summoned her elemental waffe of the magic bow. Without waiting for the other party to answer, she immediately unleashed an attack to achieve containment -- such was the natural result expected from the «Ice Storm».

The freezing arrow was shot straight forward, leaving a trail like a comet's tail.

However--

"How boorish, little Laurenfrost lady."

The darkness gave birth to crimson flames which instantly devoured the arrow of frost.

Amidst the dancing flames, a person's figure was illuminated in the darkness.

"...Y-You... are...!"

Claire could feel shivers traveling all over her spine.

"I-I don't believe this..."

Similarly, Rinslet was frozen in her bow-drawing posture.

Subduing the crimson flames, a scarlet mask appeared in the darkness.

Dark-colored hair fluttered in the wind.

"Ren Ashbell--!"

Claire cried out with despair.

(...Why, why would she be in a place like this!?)

Questions spread out and filled her mind.

No, the reason was not important right now. The undeniable truth currently was the fact that the strongest elementalist of the current «Blade Dance» had appeared before Claire.

(...What should I do? Right now, what is the best possible course of action?)

Cold sweat flowed down to Claire's chin.

Fighting was out of the question. But what if running away presented an opening to the enemy--

--At this time, Claire suddenly noticed.

Why the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, had appeared at this location.

«Team Inferno» had made moves on «Team Scarlet» numerous times already.

That Ren Ashbell was unrelated to the current situation... Making such an assertion would be utterly naive and optimistic.

"Are you actually the one who took Fianna away!?"

Suppressing the fear she felt towards the existence before her, Claire cried out.

"Me, taking the Ordesia princess?"

"T-That's right, transforming into Kamito's appearance... It must be your doing!"

"..."

Several seconds passed--

"...I see, so that's what happened."

Ren Ashbell nodded to herself as if she figured out something.

"Did the witch intend to steal a march -- or perhaps, it was under the orders of the Alphas Theocracy's «Snake»?"

"Stop pretending you're unaware of it!"

Claire summoned the fiery hell cat by her feet.

Even though it was a meaningless act, Claire thought it could at least provide some sort of intimidation--

The instant Scarlet appeared--

"Hoh--"

Suddenly, Ren Asbell exclaimed profoundly.

"The Elstein's family's «Scarlet Valkyrie» eh? A spirit completely unsuited to you in your current state."

"...What?"

After whispering words completely unfamiliar to Claire, she continued.

"Interesting. Let's play for a bit."

Using her white gloved right hand, she started a small fire.

"...!"

Claire bit her lip hard.

"What should we do, Claire?"

"There's no choice, Rinslet, we must fight."

After all, if Ren Ashbell were to get serious, escape was completely out of the question.

"However, you might be able to escape while I'm fighting."

"Hmph, please keep these stupid jokes to yourself."

Rinslet shook her head with great resolve and readied her magic bow of ice.

"...Rinslet, thank you."

With a barely audible voice, Claire spoke to her childhood friend, then immediately--

She turned to face the strongest blade dancer who emanated a terrifyingly oppressive aura simply by standing there.

No chance for victory. Also impossible to flee.

Most likely, they were going to lose their «Magic Stones» and be forced to retire here.

However, Kamito and the rest of the team should be able to continue fighting to the last day of the «Blade Dance».

--Precisely because she believed so, Claire was able to resolve herself.

So long as she had resolution, fear was no longer a problem.

"Ren Ashbell, I have a question for you."

Claire inquired at this time.

"What?"

"You, are you truly that Ren Ashbell?"

"What do you mean?"

The ruby-like eyes flashed from behind the mask, penetrating Claire.

"You are not the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, the one whom I idolize -- That's what I mean."

"...Indeed."

The masked elementalist admitted with forthrightness.

"It's true, I am not the Ren Ashbell you know."

"Hearing that, I am relieved."

With a sigh of relief, Claire summoned Flametongue in her hands.

"--In that case, I can go all out without reservation!"

Yelling at the same time, she began to swing the fiery whip.

A crimson slash split the darkness of the night acutely.

"Not bad in terms of the «Elemental Waffe»'s purity. Nevertheless--"

The elementalist who had stolen Ren Ashbell's name -- drew a magic circle in the air with flames burning on her fingertip.

"--Come forth from the furnace of conflagration, «Hell Hound»."

From the burning magic circle appeared a hunting hound enveloped in fire.

Rather than spirit summoning magic, this was a pseudo life form forged from magical flames.

The flaming hound roared and rushed forward, ripping Flametongue apart with its sharp claws.

"Impossible! My «Scarlet»...!"

"Let me show you the proper way to use fire."

The summoned «Hell Hound» roared with savagery as it pounced.

"...!?"

"Claire, dodge!"

Slicing through the air with an acute sound, freezing arrows flew over Claire's to smash the hound.

"Thanks a lot, Rinslet!"

"The Laurenfrost family's strongest demon ice spirit -- So you're the one who inherited it."

"You know Judia?"

Rinslet's eyes widened in a stare.

Ren Ashbell silently summoned a vortex of fire in her hands.

"Let's go, Scarlet!"

As Claire released divine power, Flametongue swiftly regenerated and lit on fire once more.

Just as the crimson slash flashed again -- in that very instant, Ren Ashbell disappeared.

"...!?"

In the next instant, the scarlet mask appeared in Claire's view.

"...Impossible, teleportation!?"

"The power of fire lies not only in destruction. Its traits also include producing mirages through differences in air temperature."

Her tone of voice sounded almost like a teacher lecturing a student.

(Is that so, using flames to disorient light around the body--)

Enveloped in fire, a fist landed on Claire's chest.

As her body was wrapped in fire, Claire was easily blown away like a piece of paper, falling on the ground.

"...Guh... Ooh...!"

Unable to breathe. The flames around her were snatching oxygen from the surrounding air.

As Claire panted, Flametongue returned to the hell cat's form. Like a ravenous creature, Scarlet devoured all the flames surrounding her.

Amidst flickering fire, Ren Ashbell's figure approached without pause.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Innumerable freezing arrows tore through the darkness of the night as they were shot.

However, Ren Ashbell did not make any motion to evade.

"Red castle walls, intercepting armies ten thousand strong -- «Flame Wall»."

Instantly, the erected barrier of fire vanquished the freezing arrows completely.

"Excellent aim and speed -- However, your power is decisively inadequate. This is fatal for a sniper."

As soon as these words were uttered, burning arrows were shot from behind the wall of fire, flying towards Rinslet.

Rinslet intended to unleash freezing arrows again but was too late.

"I'm not going to let you succeed -- «Flame Wall»."

Claire immediately performed the same magic.

However.

"Yah!"

The burning arrows easily penetrated the barrier of fire, striking the two girls and blowing them into the thicket.

"...Im... possible...!"

"Whether it is the skill in spirit magic or the absolute amount of divine power, you two are both inferior. Even if you use the same magic, a difference in power is only inevitable."

"Guh..."

Completely overwhelming.

As users of the same attribute of fire, to think such a difference in level was possible.

Stepping upon the intensely burning flames, the masked elemental list approached slowly.

As if trying to protect Claire who was collapsed on the ground, the fiery hell cat blocked her path.

"Scarlet, don't!"

Despite Claire's cries--

Scarlet roared acutely and attacked the enemy before them.

However, the masked girl easily dodged and unleashed a punch infused with divine power.

The hell cat was struck down on the ground with a painful scream.

"--Scarlet!"

"Without releasing its true name, even a renowned spirit weapon can only perform at this miserable level--"

"...Releasing its true name?"

Still lying on the ground, Claire frowned.

She had heard from her grandfather that «Scarlet»'s true name as a spirit had been lost since ancient times.

Why would this girl know about this--

At this very moment.

"How disappointing, Claire Rouge. You are not worthy of fighting me in the finals."

"...!"

A massive ball of flame appeared in Ren Ashbell's hand.

This was the spirit magic of «Fireball». However, its size was orders of magnitudes greater than Claire's.

(If this attack strikes us directly--)

Claire forcefully shifted her gaze towards behind her.

Struck down by the burning arrows and collapsed on the ground, Rinslet was panting painfully.

She was in no state to stand up and evade--

"--Rinslet!"

In that very instant--

Claire's twintails became untied and stood up burning like flames.

A fiery blaze burst forth from the depths of her eyes of ruby.

"--What?"

An exclamation of surprise was leaked from beneath Ren Asbell's mask as she released the fireball.

Crimson flames came forth from Claire's hands, devouring--

--Or rather, it incinerated the massive fire into nothing.

Instead of exploding, the giant fireball disappeared in midair.

"Pant, pant, pant... Guh..."

Maintaining the same pose as when she unleashed the crimson flames--

Claire fell upon her knees like an unstrung puppet.

"W-What on earth just happened...?"

Rinslet moaned with her face filled with surprise.

This was not without reason. The unbelievable phenomenon that just occurred had completely surpassed common sense knowledge of spirit magic.

"Flames that incinerates other flames -- What an interesting sight to witness."

Ren Ashbell spoke softly as she approached Claire who had collapsed from exhaustion.

"As I thought, the one suited to the role of the «Darkness Queen» is--"

Just as her fingertips were about to caress Claire's face, in that very instant--

Stab--!

A short sword flew across the scarlet mask, embedding itself into the ground.

"Don't think you can touch my master so easily -- Ren Ashbell."

"...!?"

That voice caused Claire to open her eyes slightly--

"Kami... to..."

Hurrying to the scene from out of the darkness was Kamito with the «Demon Slayer» in hand.

"Kazehaya Kamito--"

"You bitch, how dare you do this to Claire and Rinslet...!"

Wrath swelled in Kamito's jet black eyes as he kicked the ground and leaped.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Closing the distance instantly, he swung the brightly shining sacred sword straight down without question.

With a great flash of light, the sword blade sung with metallic timbre.

"...!"

Summoned suddenly without anyone noticing--

Appearing in Ren Ashbell's hand was a burning sword of fire.

"Elemental waffe -- no wait, that's a creation of spirit magic..."

Claire murmured as she shuddered. For the elemental waffe of the strongest class, «Terminus Est», to be blocked by a sword of spirit magic--

How much divine power had been infused to forge its creation?

Sparks shone brightly in the darkness. One round, two rounds... The two clashed and engaged one another intensely in battle.

"How could that kind of thing block Est!?"

During the third round, Ren Ashbell's sword of fire shattered.

Kamito took a step forward and unleashed a slash with godlike speed.

"Your movements are much improved compared to a few days ago. As expected of the one who defeated «Nepenthes Lore» without awakening--"

Ren Ashbell whispered softly beneath the mask. Immediately afterwards, her figure disappeared suddenly like a mirage--

Kamito's sword simply sliced through air.

"...She's fleeing?"

"Go on and advance to the finals, Kazehaya Kamito."

From the forest enshrouded in darkness, her voice could be heard.

"--Once that time arrives, you shall learn about the truth of what happened three years ago."

Part 3

In the night forest where the spirits were restless--

Kamito was shouldering the unconscious Claire on his back. Beside him, Fenrir was carrying the likewise unconscious Rinslet.

A transient encounter had concluded with the scarlet-masked elementalist -- the other «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell.

Despite the briefness of their crossing of blades, Kamito learned with deep realization.

(Now that was truly a monster...)

Despite her appearance of a girl's, she was without any doubt a monster surpassing Nepenthes Lore.

Whether in the level of swordsmanship or in the strength of divine power, the difference was overwhelming.

(Furthermore, that girl defeated these two without even summoning her contracted spirit.)

Cold sweat flowed down his neck.

(Even if I recovered my power from three years ago, I--)

The «Spirit Seal» on his left hand stung with pain.

Moments later, when Kamito arrived back at «Team Scarlet»'s stronghold--

"Kamito, what happened to them!?"

Ellis cried out in surprise when she came out to greet them.

"...Yeah. Sorry, could you help me a bit."

Explaining to Ellis what had happened, Kamito enlisted her help to lay the two girls onto the beds in the tent.

"What about the other two?"

"Princess Linfa is currently seeking Sjora Kahn's location. Shao Fu is accompanying her."

"So it does take quite a long time, right?"

Kamito wished to rescue Fianna as quickly as possible without a second to lose.

"I will go check on their progress. Kamito, you should stay by the sides of Claire and Rinslet here."

Saying that, Ellis left the tent.

"..."

Left behind, Kamito activated healing spirit crystals and had the girls clasp them in their hands.

As if trying to comfort her, Scarlet was licking Claire's severely burned hands.

(...What on earth happened? Even as a user of fire, she looked like she got burned by her own flames or something.)

The only conceivable possibility was spirit magic running out of control--

However, Kamito did not believe Claire could make such an elementary mistake.

Soon after, Claire was the first to wake up.

"Ooh, Kami... to...?"

Frowning tensely from the pain, she slowly raised her upper body.

"Is your condition okay?"

"Yeah, looks like she held back and showed mercy. To her, the battle just now was just child's play."

Claire bit her lip with chagrin.

"Have we gained any clues to Fianna's location?"

"Yeah. It was «Team Inferno»'s Sjora Kahn who kidnapped Fianna. Sjora most likely decided on her own to perpetrate this act. Those members of «Team Inferno» don't seem very united."

"However, why would she take Fianna away?"

"...Indeed, the «Magic Stone» is not the goal."

Kamito rested his chin on his hand as he pondered--

"Come to think of it, Sjora's familiar said something incomprehensible. About Fianna being suited to be the «Darkness Queen» or whatever, somehow it feels like..."

"...«Darkness Queen»?"

Claire's eye brows jumped.

"You're heard of it?"

"I seem to recall seeing it before. A forbidden book from my family's sealed library. Because the Elstein family gave rise to many «Queens» throughout the generations, we have collected a large number of forbidden books related to legends regarding queens. That one, I think it said..."

Claire pressed an index finger against her temple--

"The Elemental Lords ruling over «Astral Zero» actually total six in number. If that's the case, there should exist a corresponding «Queen» to serve that sixth Elemental Lord. Of course, this is deemed heresy by the «Divine Ritual Institute»."

"The sixth Elemental Lord..."

Kamito felt a stirring in his heart.

A certain name surfaced in his mind, one fraught with a complicated past

The being whose existence was wiped out in the distant past, the Darkness Elemental Lord -- «Ren Ashdoll».

An existence whose veracity was still in doubt, why would its name now be--

"...Ooh, Kami... to-san..."

"Rinslet?"

"...Ah, Kamito-san, where are you touching, so perverted!"

"Wha!?"

...Was she talking in her dreams? She must be having some sort of outrageous dream.

"Y-You, y-you're doing what in her dreams...?"

Claire glared with a frightening gaze.

"W-Wait a minute, how could you hold me responsible for this!?"

"Uwah, h-how could this happen, what are you doing with Claire, ah..."

"H-Hold it right there, what are you dreaming about!? Hurry and get up!"

"Claire... And also, Kamito?"

Blushing intensely, Claire shook Rinslet by the shoulders, causing her to open her eyes forcefully.

"Seriously..."

Kamito breathed a sigh of relief.

Ellis entered the tent at this time.

"Princess Linfa has completed the preparations for clairvoyance. Let us gather at the spring."

--When everyone had gathered by the spring, Linfa was already performing the last ritual dance, dressed in her glittering rainbow-colored elemental waffe, «Seraphim Feathers».

The great imperial princess who always acted so childishly appeared especially sacred at this moment.

Bowing towards the spring, she then quietly turned towards Kamito's group.

"--Hereafter, clairvoyance shall be performed on the witch's lair. Watch carefully."

Everyone nodded silently.

Softly uttering a spirit language prayer, Linfa activated the magic for far sight.

This was high level magic for displaying a target's location by interfering with «Astral Zero»'s space.

...Very soon, the water surface began to move even in the absence of wind.

The vague image of some unknown place appeared on the surface of the spring water that reflected moonlight.

Kamito and the group focused their gaze sharply on the water surface.

Dense flourishing forest. Desolate, decrepit and collapsed stone columns. Rock faces covered with spreading moss. All around were the remnant of flaking sculptures.

--This was apparently the site of an ancient shrine's remains.

"The image belongs within the grounds of the «Blade Dance», right?"

"Hmm, in principle, yes."

"Hey, this place, could it be there?"

Claire spoke up.

"There?"

"See, the historical site the «Rupture Division» used as their «stronghold»--"

"Oh right!"

It was the place where Kamito and Claire had taken shelter from the rain last time when they went over to negotiate an alliance with the «Rupture Division».

The place should have been damaged by Nepenthes Lore already. Had a new barrier been erected there to reuse the location?

"Oh dear, the other party seems to have noticed!"

Linfu suddenly spoke up.

Instantly, the water surface began to shake violently, disrupting the image and causing it to disappear.

"...What happened?"

"Hmm, looks like the witch discovered it."

"Knowing the place is good enough, let's go!"

"Yeah!"

Hearing Kamito's rally for action, everyone nodded vigorously.

Part 4

"Ufufu, looks like they have caught wind of this place."

In the cave sealed off by viscous darkness--

Sjora Kahn's lips distorted into a smile.

"Kamito-kun... They...?"

In a hazy state of consciousness -- Fianna murmured his name.

Having endured several hours of sustained mental torture, she was currently severely weakened in body and mind.

However, the emptiness lingering in her eyes showed minute brightness once more.

"...How truly amazing. To think you could continue enduring my mental domination for so long."

Mocking sardonically, the witch lifted Fianna's chin with her hand.

"...!?"

"But how truly regrettable. Your hopes will be crushed before your eyes. When that is done, even you, exalted princess, you shall fall, yes?"

Accompanied by delightful jeering, Sjora's fingernails dug into Fianna's smooth skin.

Bright red blood flowed down from Fianna's face.

"Your friends will be arriving soon. I must prepare a good welcoming for them."

Sjora turned her heels and walked to the center of the cave.

On the stone floor, a gigantic magic circle had been carved.

Raising both her arms, Sjora recited softly a long spirit language incantation.

Halfway through, the magic circle began to give off an ominous crimson glow as the historical site began to rumble.

"This... is...!?"

Fianna suddenly opened her eyes wide.

"Fufu, this ancient ruin was used in the ancient past as a «Gate» for summoning powerful spirits."

Zuzuzu... Zu... Zuzu... Zuzuzuzu...!

From the center of the magic circle, disgusting monsters were slowly crawling out.

One, two, three... No, their numbers were increasing without limit.

This was a swarm of demon spirits that humans were definitely unable to control due to their abnormal mental structure.

"--Descend upon a bloody feast! Dead ones of the endless abyss!"

The demon caster -- Sjora Kahn laughed with a jeer.

"Very well, please welcome the guests with due ceremony. My lovely children."

Chapter 9 - Pandemonium

Part 1

--A few moments after that.

Kamito and his group arrived at the historical site which the «Rupture Division» had formerly used as their stronghold.

"Is this really the place?"

"...Yeah, no mistake about it."

Faced with Ellis' doubtful question, Claire gulped a mouthful of air.

Ellis' question was not without reason. Currently, the surroundings of the ruins was filled with an ominous aura that did not match with a barrier built by an elementalist.

"It seems completely different from the last time we came here..."

Kamito stepped in as he placed a hand on «Terminus Est» at his waist.

"This is already the interior of a witch's barrier -- Be careful."

"It's almost like a spider's lair. The air is rather turbid."

Shao spat out her words.

Entering an elementalist's carefully constructed «stronghold» was like attacking a secure castle. Without sufficient superiority in combat potential, breaching the defenses would be impossible.

(Especially a «stronghold» constructed by a princess maiden skilled in ritual magic--)

Feeling an illusion as if his feet were trudging through a muddy bog, Kamito made his way forward.

The entrance of the ruins lay open like a mouth of darkness, inviting victims to an obvious trap.

"...This is exactly like the «Pandemonium» of legend."

Just as Claire muttered, in that instant--

"...Something's coming!?"

Kamito halted his steps and turned back to look up at the pitch black night sky.

Instantly, numerous magic circles appeared in the air -- the whole area was covered by crimson flashing light.

Then--

From the magic circles, a swarm of innumerable strangely shaped beings burst forth like a tide.

Gigantic eyes with several arms growing out of them. Burning skulls that cackled noisily. Amorphous amoeba that tumbled about. Giants with heads sprouting from their arms and shoulders. Spherical shadows that expanded and contracted incessantly--

"...Demon spirits!"

"We of the «Four Gods» were wiped out by these things!"

In order to protect Linfa, Shao readied her elemental waffe, the «Divine Tiger Fangs».

"But these numbers... Cannot compare to last time!"

Dozens, hundreds, thousands -- the swarm of demon spirits was increasing without bound, forming a pitch black cloud that enshrouded the entire vicinity of the ruins. Even though Sjora Kahn was known as the demon caster, summoning such an enormous number of demon spirits should be impossible. Very likely, the ancient ruins themselves functioned as some sort of summoning device.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Rinslet unleashed arrows of ice, striking down dozens of demon spirits in succession.

Nevertheless, this was merely a drop in the bucket. The rate of increase in numbers greatly surpassed Rinslet's efforts.

"...This is hopeless. Faced with such numbers of spirits as opponents, this will be never ending."

Claire yelled out as she swept enemies away with Flametongue.

"..."

Watching the cloud-like swarm, Kamito pondered for a while, then said:

"Hey, I've got a suggestion--"

"What?"

"Leaves these things to me. Claire and the others, why don't you go rescue Fianna?"

Slicing the demon spirit before him in half, Kamito suggested.

"...No way! Even for you, Kamito, these numbers are--"

"You'll exhaust your divine power very quickly and become unable to use your elemental waffe!"

Claire and Rinslet instantly objected.

Indeed, «Terminus Est»'s massive consumption of divine power was its one and only weakness.

--But of course, Kamito was already aware of that.

"No problem. After all, we have the great imperial princess here who is highly skilled in ritual dance performances, right?"

"Hmm, you can rely on me."

Clad in the «Kirin»'s elemental waffe of the «Seraphim Feathers», Linfa thumped her paper-thin chest confidently.

"Making use of the «stronghold»'s leylines to obtain blessings is completely effortless."

"I will be in charge of guarding Linfa-sama. Kamito, you focus on destroying these things."

Using the «Divine Tiger Fangs», Shao instantly swept away the demon spirits at the shrine entrance.

"...I understand. Then I'll leave this place to Kamito and the rest here. Let's go!"

Claire took swift action as soon as their decision was made. Nodding briefly in acknowledgement, she rushed towards the shrine entrance together with Ellis and Rinslet.

"I'm relying on you girls to rescue Fianna!"

"Yes, we will definitely bring her back!"

Kamito watched as the three disappeared into the depths of the shrine--

For just an instant, Kamito relaxed his shoulder completely.

"Very well, with that, I can now use her sword techniques without any reservation--"

Licking his parched lips, Kamito grinned fearlessly.

"...Come, third rate flunkies. I will take care of you all no matter how many of you there are."

In the next instant, several hundred demon spirits rushed towards Kamito all at once.

Part 2

"--Evil winds, go and rampage!"

"Turn into charcoal, fireball!"

Using blades of wind released like raging waves, the swarm of demon spirits in the passage were swept clean all at once. Riding on that tornado, scorching flames of conflagration burned intensely.

Although there were still many demon spirits inside the shrine, they numbered far fewer than those outside. Exterminating the demon spirits who kept popping up like bubbles, Claire and her group continued to advance along the passageway.

"Will Kamito be fine?"

"Don't worry about that guy."

As Ellis voiced her concern, Claire shook her head.

(...That's right, that guy will never lose.)

The instant Kamito's face surfaced in her mind, Claire inexplicably found her cheeks getting boiling hot as if being burned by a fire.

Lubdub -- the beating in her chest intensified as well.

(...N-No, th-this isn't anything like that!)

Claire shook her head as if trying to deny the notion.

(D-Damn it, it's all Fianna's fault for saying something weird...)

"Claire, what's the matter?"

"N-Nothing of any importance!"

Claire brandished Flametongue and sent the demon spirits before them flying.

As the sound of their footsteps rebounded off the hard surface of the ground, the trio continued to run along the long passage that seemed to stretch to who knows where.

"...I never knew these ruins were so vast."

Would they be able to find Fianna amidst such vast premises?

Just as Claire began to worry--

Suddenly, the passage opened up to reveal a large spacious hall.

"Be careful. This could very well be a trap."

With a wave of the hand, Claire produced illumination using spirit magic.

Suddenly, a collapsed figure appeared at the depths of the great hall.

"Who is that!?"

Claire readied Flametongue with wariness, then--

"Wait... It's me!"

"...Fianna!?"

Sprawled on the ground was Fianna whose uniform was all cut and tattered.

"W-What happened to you!?"

"Are you injured?"

The trio swiftly rushed over.

Fianna lowered her gaze as if very apologetic.

"Yeah, I was able to find an opportunity to escape, but my foot--"

She displayed an expression of pain. It seemed like she had sprained one foot.

"Are you able to stand?"

"...Uh, yeah."

As Fianna reached out, Claire was just about to hold her hand when--

Suddenly, she was struck with a sense of dissonance.

(--This is wrong!)

Swiftly she withdrew her hand and leaped backwards.

In that instant, a sharp shortsword narrowly missed the top of her head by millimeters.

"...You, you're not Fianna!"

"Fufu, as befits the younger sister of the «Calamity Queen», your senses are quite sharp."

As soon as the sentence was finished, Fianna's image began to quiver like a mirage--

A beautiful girl dressed in a highly exposing outfit appeared.

"...Sjora Kahn!"

Yelling out shrilly, Claire struck out with Flametongue.

Intensely burning crimson flames attacked the witch--

"Ara, what an impatient little lady. Come forth -- demon spirit «Baldanders»!"

"...!?"

From Sjora's shadow, out crept a thin and faceless humanoid.

The humanoid spread its arms to protect its contractor--

Immediately, it was unceremoniously sent flying by Flametongue.

"...Eh?"

Claire paused with disappointment, for she originally expected her attack to be blocked, .

Striking the wall of rock, the humanoid lay tilted and powerless like a puppet. Scorched by the crimson flames, its outer skin that resembled black metal was melting. It struggled desperately, trying to escape from the fire, but--

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Numerous freezing arrows rained down from above, shattering its arm.

(...This thing is the «Demon Caster»'s contracted spirit?)

--Regardless, it was way too weak.

(This seems rather suspicious instead...)

"You think you can defeat us alone?"

"Fufu, the true value of «Baldanders» lies not in brute force but in its other abilities--"

While dodging Rinslet's arrows of ice, the witch recited words for a contracted spirit's releasing.

"--Thou, weakest of the weak and strongest of the strong, heed my command and hereby take form!"

"...I won't let you succeed!"

With a flying leap, Ellis made a thrust using «Ray Hawk» but ended up being a step late.

A pure white mask appeared in the witch's hand.

"Elemental waffe -- «Proteus Masques»."

In the blink of an eye, Sjora's red lips twisted as the image of her figure distorted like a mirage.

Then--

"...!?"

Claire, Rinslet and Ellis gasped at the same time.

Over there was--

With gorgeous black hair and mysterious jet black eyes -- a beautiful girl.

She was dressed in an exotic foreign outfit that had a relatively long lower hem and resembled ritual attire.

In her left hand, she wielded a demon sword of darkness that emanated an aura of disaster.

"How on earth..."

The winner of the Blade Dance festival three years earlier.

--The «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, was now standing present.

Part 3

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The «Demon Slayer» traced out an arc wiping out swarms of demon spirits.

Faced with the onslaught of the abnormally shaped beings, Kamito chopped, slashed and sliced nonstop.

"...Th-That guy, is he really human?"

Watching the blade dance that seemed like it was performed by a fierce god, Linfa's eyes widened as she carried out her ritual dancing.

Ten-odd minutes had passed since the blade dance began -- Terminus Est's light remained bright without waning.

The magic circle drawn on the ground was providing Kamito with power continuously through the «Leylines».

"--That said, given such numbers, it's still quite tiring."

Kamito smiled wryly as he chopped down several demon spirits.

Although he had already defeated hundreds of these demon spirits, the swarm showed no signs of reducing in size.

(I really don't know if my stamina can last until Claire and the girls return...)

At this moment, sensing the presence of an enemy attacking from behind, Kamito turned around and slashed--

However, the slash simply cut through empty space.

"What!?"

In that instant, jet black lightning had been released, reducing the demon spirit to charcoal.

(Did Shao cover me? No, the spirit magic just now was--)

Suddenly, a jet black feather floated down before the tip of Kamito's nose.

"You seem to have your hands full, Kamito. Would you like my assistance?"

The lovely voice reaching his ears stirred him from his very core.

Black hair fluttered in the wind, seeming as if woven from the very night itself.

Twirling the dress of darkness, touching down lightly on the ground was the black-winged angel.

"Restia..."

"Good evening, Kamito."

Seeing Kamito rendered speechless, the darkness spirit girl smiled with a chuckle.

"Finally, my power has recovered to the point where it allows me to assume this appearance. Although I'm far from peak condition, I do have more than enough strength to play with some low level spirits."

"...You really intend to help?"

"Yes. These kinds of fodder won't help your awakening no matter how many you defeat. Let me take this opportunity to play for a bit."

Restia released jet black lightning from her fingertips, turning multiple demon spirits into charcoal.

"You're not going to transform into my sword?"

Kamito joked to his past partner--

"Ara, my jealousy runs deep, you know? Please first rescind your contract with that sacred sword, then we'll talk."

"--Sorry, that really cannot be helped."

"...Fool."

Restia pouted as if sulking and glared at the demon spirits before her, taking out her wrath upon them.

"O black blade of darkness, capable of crushing the scales of dragons, annihilate mine enemies -- «Arc Blast»."

Instantly, numerous flashes of lightning descended from the sky, wiping out all the demon spirits in the area.

"Y-You, still merciless as ever..."

As Kamito's faced twitched, Restia turned around to face him again.

"Hey, you must be listening, right? --Miss Legendary Sacred Sword?"

Restia spoke provocatively.

At this moment, the «Demon Slayer» in Kamito's hand shone with dazzling light.

It was as if it was acting defiantly in response to Restia.

"Why don't we have a contest? Let's see who can ultimately defeat more enemies, you or I?"

The silver-white sword in Kamito's hand shone with even greater brightness.

Part 4

--From afar, the faint noise of weapons in action could be heard.

(Kamito-kun and the rest are fighting...)

Chained and restrained, Fianna bit her lip hard.

With the power of the spirit contract sealed away, she was nothing but a weak and powerless girl.

Simply an imprisoned princess waiting to be rescued by her prince.

(I hate this...!)

As she struggled desperately, the metal restraints dug deeper into her wrists.

If she simply shattered her own «Magic Stone», she should be able to spare her teammates from trouble. But with her wrists restrained currently, she could not even do that.

(No, but even if I can return to their side, I am still--)

Perhaps she would end up burdening them instead of helping. Such worries seethed in her mind.

At this moment, suddenly -- the rigid impact of boots resounded within the cave.

"...Who is it?"

Fianna asked towards the darkness.

It could not be Sjora. The witch should still be busy intercepting Kamito and the rest.

Suddenly, a small flame was lit in the darkness.

Illuminated by that flickering light was a scarlet mask.

"...Ren Ashbell!?"

Fianna stared with wide-eyed amazement as the masked girl approached silently.

"What do you intend--"

"Don't move. Unless you want your wrists to become charcoal."

Whispering softly, she then touched the handcuffs with her fiery hand.

The shackles which sealed away the power of spirit contracts easily melted and fell to the ground.

"Why... do this...?"

"You are a key part of my «Plan». I cannot let the witch have you."

Leaving those words behind, the masked girl prepared to turn around and leave.

However.

"Wait... Hold on and wait, Ren Ashbell!"

Stumbling around, Fianna grabbed her hand desperately.

--I can't let her leave just like that.

It was imperative to ask what she intended to do to Kamito.

Fianna starred at the scarlet mask whose gaze bore down coldly upon her.

"Sjora Kahn said that Kamito-kun is the «Demon King's successor» and that Claire and I are the «Darkness Queen» candidates?"

"..."

"What are your intentions for Kamito-kun?"

"The witch spoke too much huh--"

A whisper of annoyance escaped from the dark side of the mask.

"Don't screw around... Kamito-kun is not a tool for you people to use!"

"Kazehaya Kamito is my trump card. --For the impending war."

"What on earth...?"

"You are currently unqualified to be privy to the matter. «Lost Queen»."

In the next instant, Fianna found herself suspended in midair.

Still grabbing onto Ren Ashbell's arm, Fianna was thrown onto the hard stone surface of the ground.

"...Guh, ah...!"

Intense pain erupted as if all her bones had shattered. Nevertheless, Fianna still did not let go of her arm.

"Hoh?"

"...I won't let you leave... Until you explain fully about Kamito-kun!"

Her voice trembled. Fianna could feel her heart beating intensely from the frighteningly oppressive presence emanating from Ren Ashbell.

Even so, she still resolved to never let go of that arm no matter what.

"You haven't changed at all from back then."

"...Eh?"

Ren Ashbell's voice changed.

--No longer completely indifferent, slight annoyance had crept into her tone of voice.

"Nonsensical words from the powerless only serve to disgust others."

Pulled by the arm's frightening strength, Fianna was slammed hard against the ground repeatedly.

However, despite her fading consciousness, Fianna still did not let go.

"I understand... In the past, you also failed to protect certain things."

"...What?"

"Unable to protect something precious, you fell into despair!"

Fianna screamed as she panted.

--Four years ago. That particular day when the great shrine of the «Fire Elemental Lord» had been plunged into flames of conflagration.

Fianna had been powerless to stop that particular person she revered and held dear.

Struck down with mental trauma from the fear, Fianna even became disqualified from being an elemental.

"Indeed. Powerless one, you were unable to protect anything--!"

Intensely burning flames erupted from Ren Ashbell's arm.

The surging wave of hot wind blew Fianna away forcibly, sending her flying into a wall of rock.

"Yah... Ah...!"

"--Back then, I must have warned you. Do not appear before me ever again."

"What...?"

Barely hanging onto her consciousness, Fianna suddenly realized.

The scene from that particular day was vividly replayed in her mind.

'Fianna Ray Ordesia -- Do not appear before me ever again.'

Fianna also remembered how the traitorous «Queen» had made her declaration amidst burning flames of conflagration.

"Impossible... You! Could you actually be her!?"

"--Just like four years ago. You cannot stop me."

From the inner side of the crimson mask, blazing eyes akin to burning flames stared right through Fianna.

These were ruby-red eyes identical to those of Claire Rouge.

Then this girl's true identity must be--

"...I am finding more and more reasons I can't let you leave."

Fianna stood up with staggering steps.

"Claire... She came here precisely for the sake of meeting you!"

"..."

Silence. However--

Even though it was impossible to see her expression behind the mask, Fianna could still notice her overwhelming imposing presence waver.

Pressing down on the throbbing pain of her arm, Fianna stepped forward, one step at a time.

"I am no longer the same as four years ago. Because--"

I now have comrades fighting courageously alongside me. I now have reasons I cannot back down no matter what.

If I retreat now, I will probably return to being that «Lost Queen», most likely.

"I have no wish to repeat my regrets from back then."

Fianna sternly stood before Ren Ashbell.

"Nonsensical. Well then, I shall make you remember again. The flames that brought you to despair on that day."

The wind quivered, bringing a wave of heat. Rumbling and swirling flames were generated in her hand.

This was Claire's specialty of flame type spirit magic -- «Fireball».

However, its size and temperature completely dwarfed Claire's level.

"...!?"

Fianna's entire body broke out in cold sweat.

Her legs became immobile. However, she could not retreat. Absolutely unacceptable.

"Regret your powerlessness, «Lost Queen»!"

Crimson flames with the ability to incinerate everything were released.

Fianna closed her eyes as she recalled the image of that girl in her mind.

--Three years ago, the image of the «Strongest Blade Dancer» who gave her courage when she had lost everything.

These flames could not be blocked using defensive magic. Even a knight spirit's armor would probably melt in their heat.

Even so, she had no choice left but to try her luck -- Let's take a gamble.

"Thou shalt be my sword, thou shalt be my shield, with unlimited towering light, purify and exorcise those belonging to darkness--!"

As if trying to block the incoming flames, Fianna stretched out her arms and recited the words for summoning.

Amidst the darkness enshrouding the great hall, a flash of light beyond comparison burst forth.

The exploding barrier of light scattered the flames and momentarily pushed back Ren Ashbell's body.

"Success, finally...?"

Unbelievable -- With such an expression, Fianna panted as she whispered. Gripped in her hands was a beautiful rapier that gave off dazzling light.

Fianna had already made substantial progress in training her elemental waffe's release.

The incident four years ago was what caused her to become the «Lost Queen».

In the depths of her heart, it was a traumatic scar that seemed as if it had been smoked by scorching flames.

Now, having completely resolved herself, Fianna was finally able to unleash the true power of her contracted spirit.

"As a princess maiden of the «Divine Ritual Institute», you have manifested your «Elemental Waffe» huh--"

Ren Ashbell's voice was filled with amazement and admiration.

"--I see. I shall take back what I just said... Guh!?"

Suddenly, she collapsed on her knees as she pressed one hand against her heart.

"...Eh?"

"...Time's up, I see. This contemptible body."

Panting painfully, she stood up and made her way towards the depths of the darkness--

"W-Wait up!"

Fianna instantly tried to pursue but was blocked by the intense flames burning before her.

She only halted her steps for but an instant. --Nevertheless, as soon as the flames vanished, Ren Ashbell's figure was gone.

"...My senior. Why do you..."

Just as Fianna stood there in shock, murmuring.

She could hear acute noises of battle coming from afar.

Chapter 10 - The Strongest Blade Dancer

Part 1

Ren Ashbell -- «The Strongest Blade Dancer».

Idolizing Ren Ashbell's blade dance, Claire had resolved herself to become a powerful elementalist.

Because Ren Ashbell was her goal, Claire never gave up no matter what hardship she faced.

She was the one whom Claire had idolized all along.

Claire had always dreamed if there was one day they could perform a blade dance together.

"--How utterly tasteless, Sjora Kahn."

Claire glared sharply at the enemy who had appeared before them--

The witch who imitated the «Strongest Blade Dancer»'s appearance.

"Do you really think our attacks will hesitate simply because of that appearance?"

Gorgeous long hair the color of the dark night. Eyes where mysterious darkness resided.

A lovely face that seemed dignified as steel yet graceful as a flower.

The girl before her eyes was without a doubt identical in appearance to the blade dancer she had always admired.

However, Claire noticed a significant difference between this fake and the true person.

Namely, the twisted expression of mockery.

(...The Ren Ashbell I admire will never display that kind of expression!)

Claire gripped Flametongue hard in her hand.

Likewise, Ellis and Rinslet did not falter either.

Instead, Ellis became increasingly enraged.

"Unforgivable... How dare you defile the admiration my esteemed foster sister and I held for her!"

«Ray Hawk»'s spear tip produced a powerful storm.

Indeed, trying to cause faltering through imitation was meaningless.

No matter what sort of magic was used, Ren Ashbell's noble airs could not be replicated.

"Fufu, how unfortunate, but this imitation is not limited to appearances, little hell cat. Did you really think «Baldanders»'s powers are limited to mere transformation magic?"

In the guise of Ren Ashbell, the witch jeered as her bright red lips twisted.

"My elemental waffe, the «Proteus Masques», has the ability to replicate the target's powers. Whether the contracted spirit or the combat skills remembered by the body, everything."

"...Th-That sort of thing, can't possibly--"

"Fufu, ignorant fools--!"

Sjora Kahn casually swung the demon sword of darkness -- the «Vorpall Sword».

Within the blink of an eye, jet black lightning burst forth from the tip of the blade and smashed the rock surface of the floor.

"...That skill is!?"

«Vorpall Blast» -- Ren Ashbell's prided demon sword technique that numerous elementalists feared during the «Blade Dance» three years ago.

"Could it be, really..."

"She can use Ren Ashbell's abilities!?"

Ellis and Rinslet expressed shock one after another.

"Very well, let's begin to blade dance, little hell cat♪"

Mimicking the appearance of the strongest blade dancer, Sjora licked the demon sword of darkness.

"She's coming--!"

The instant Claire warned, the witch's figure disappeared from sight.

(...So fast!?)

Unable to hear a sound or feel any presence from her, Claire felt like she was moving like a shadow.

Those movements were completely the same as those from three years ago.

"Take this!"

Claire swung Flametongue with maximum power. The scorching flames of conflagration surged forth as if about to devour the stony ground.

Amidst the intensely burning flame, the witch's figure vanished.

However, it was nothing to be feared.

(If I can't capture her movements, I'll just simply burn large areas--)

Using the reaction force from striking the floor with her whip, Claire swiftly leaped backwards.

This should be able to buy some time. If Sjora Kahn really replicated Ren Ashbell's sword skills, she could not be allowed to get into range for close combat.

However, Claire's plan was instantly foiled.

(--How could this be possible!?)

Sjora was not caught inside the flames.

As though she were Claire's shadow, she stayed low and followed closely while Claire jumped.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Rinslet shot out arrows which followed a parabolic trajectory, but ended up striking empty ground.

Too slow. Even Rinslet's vision as a sniper was insufficient to capture Sjora's movements.

The instant Claire landed on her feet, Sjora laughed as she lurked in the shadows--

"...Damn you. Fireball!"

"Aha, silly little hell cat♪"

The demon sword of darkness sliced through Claire's chest.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

As the intense pain filled her body, Claire could not help but scream.

Despite the fact that damage caused by «Elemental Waffen» that had yet to be materialized was normally converted into psychological damage, the witch seemed quite dead set on turning physical damage to the body into pure sensations of pain.

"What a nice scream, it makes me tremble with excitement."

Bearing the face of the strongest blade dancer, Sjora's eyes displayed a taste for sadism.

"You bastard, to dare do that to Claire -- Evil winds, go and rampage!"

Ellis swung «Ray Hawk» and released blades of wind. However--

"Useless. That type of technique is completely ineffective against Ren Ashbell--"

Running across the rocky walls to evade the wind blades, she engaged Ellis in close combat within the blink of an eye.

This was the final form of high level three-dimensional movement -- Shadow Stitching. A type of physical technique used by assassins.

Accustomed to proper knightly sword skills, Ellis was unable to capture such movements with their myriad variations.

Rushing through an opening in «Raw Hawk»'s movements, Sjora pierced Ellis' chest along with her armor with a flash of the sword.

"...Argghhh!"

"Ara ara, such a dismal performance? The elite of the Ordesia Empire, hmph."

She slashed again at Ellis who was standing unsteadily due to the pain.

"Keeper of the burning furnace, release your wrath -- «Flame Chain»!"

Struggling to her feet, Claire unleashed Flametongue in a spiral movement.

However--

"Such lukewarm flames. Are you sure you're that «Calamity Queen»'s younger sister?"

Sjora shrugged and readied the «Vorpall Sword» in a stance.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Fourth Form -- Blaze Slash!"

The demon sword swept out as if collecting the swirling flames.

"Scarlet's fire is being absorbed!?"

Expanding in size several fold, the flaming blade swung down upon Claire and the rest.

"Yaaaaaaaah!"

Claire was blown away, striking the wall of the cave.

Ellis and Rinslet were successively devoured by the massive vortex of fire that covered the entire great hall.

Claire had a flame spirit's protection, but Ellis and Rinslet on the other hand--

The two girls' bodies lay collapsed where the vortex of flame died out.

"Ah... Guh..."

Although their Academy uniforms were torn and tattered, they still managed to barely stay conscious.

Slowly, Sjora approached the two.

"...You, this...!"

Claire desperately tried to swing Flametongue but due to the concussion from striking the cave walls earlier, she could not move her fingers.

"What fools. How could you even think you could win against the «Strongest Blade Dancer»?"

Sjora twisted her lips with a cruel expression--

"Don't--"

The «Vorpall Sword» stabbed into Ellis' back as she lay collapsed on the ground.

"Guh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Intense pain filled Ellis' entire body. Her inarticulate screams filled the entire hall.

"Ahaha, how does it feel? To be vanquished by the one you idolize!"

"S-Stop it, Ellis can no longer fight!"

"Fufu, rest assured, I will not take her life. However--"

The witch chuckled as she displayed an innocent girl's smile.

"This «Blade Dance» event does not prohibit the act of destroying an elemental's mind."

Withdrawing the demon sword from Ellis' body, she then switched to stepping on Rinslet's head.

"So, this little lady here, what kind scream are you going to make?"

"YOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!"

Instantly, crimson flames erupted from Claire's palms.

"Flames are useless against me... What!?"

Holding up the demon sword, Sjora's eyes appeared to waver.

She instinctively realized that these flames were significantly different from the ones earlier.

"Impossible, such fire, identical to that woman's--"

Sjora's trembling voice was engulfed and devoured by the crimson flames.

Part 2

"Absolute Blade Arts -- Third Form, Shadowmoon Waltz!"

With a flash of «Terminus Est»'s blade, Kamito charged into the swarm of grotesque beings.

Tearing through dozens of enemies instantly, he wiped out yet another group in the blink of an eye. After the slashing attacks passed like a storm, nothing remained but the lingering light from the destroyed demon spirits.

Meanwhile, as if acting out of competition--

"Black thunder that incinerates even souls to nothingness -- «Hell Blast»!"

The darkness spirit released jet black lightning, instantly neutralizing an equal number of demon spirits.

"How competent, as expected of the «Demon Slayer» -- however, it does seem like I am slightly ahead in my kill count."

The darkness spirit girl was smiling nonchalantly.

Held in Kamito's hand, «Terminus Est» flickered in brightness as if expressing its rage.

"...How I really miss this, performing a blade dance together with Restia."



"Yes, somehow I involuntarily participated in such childish behavior."

Just as they joked around--

The former «Strongest Blade Dancer» and partner duo stood back to back.

In mere minutes, the swarm of demon spirits which originally covered the sky was almost completely wiped out.

"Very well, my assistance ends here."

"Restia?"

Turning around, Kamito found the darkness spirit girl displaying a dream-like smile.

"I merely did this on a whim. --After all, I am your enemy."

Spreading her beautiful black wings, she prepared to take flight into the night sky.

"...Restia, I still--"

There was still plenty that he wanted to tell her and ask her about.

Three years ago, she had entrusted Kamito with that «Wish».

Wanting to assassinate the «Elemental Lords», what on earth was that about?

Also, that «Wish»'s continuation was--

However, his hand reaching towards the sky was easily evaded.

"...!?"

In that instant, Kamito opened his eyes wide.

As lovely as rosebuds, Restia's adorable lips--

Gently brushed against his cheek.

"W-What are y-you doing--"

"I'll be waiting for you at the finals, Kamito."

Restia quietly withdrew her lips and smiled with a trace of melancholy--

Then with a scattering of floating black feathers, she disappeared in the air.

"Restia..."

Kamito stared blankly into space for a very long time until...

"...Ouch!"

A sharp pain suddenly came from his right arm.

"...E-Est!?"

Having returned to her form as a girl without him noticing, Est expressionlessly pinched Kamito's arm.

"..."

"W-What's the matter?"

...It was quite rare for this sword spirit to be acting in such a manner.

"Maybe, you're actually angry?"

"No, master. I am not angry."

"You're addressing me so formally now!?"

...Somehow it felt like she was greatly upset.

Despite the fact that nothing could be read from her expression, she really did seem to be angry. No question about it.

"Kamito, your contracted spirit is me, right?"

"Ah yeah... I-I don't quite understand, but anyway, I'm sorry."

As Kamito caressed her head gently, Est partially closed her eyes in great enjoyment.

"Fuah... Kamito, you're so sly."

"Kamito, what on earth are you doing? There are still enemies around."

Coming over, Shao was taken aback by the sight and remarked.

"By the way, who was that girl in the black dress? Is she -- a spirit?"

"She's my other partner."

Answering succinctly, Kamito turned his gaze towards the shrine.

Claire and the girls were not back yet.

"...Their numbers have almost completely diminished. Can I leave things here to you two?"

"Yes. At this level, we will surely manage."

"As befits the ace of the «Four Gods». Thanks!"

Kamito bumped fists with her.

"I-I am present too. Do not ignore me!"

"Yeah yeah, I got it. I got it."

Tapping the furious imperial princess on the head, Kamito took Est by the hand.

"...I'm sorry, Est. Let's try our best for a little while longer?"

"Yes, Kamito. --I am your sword, your wish is my command."

Part 3

"Huff, huff, huff..."

Panting, Claire pushed with her shoulders to lift her body.

Before her, crimson flames roared as they swirled.

Flames that incinerated other flames -- these were the same ones she had released against Ren Ashbell back in the forest last time.

Even Claire did not understand how she did it.

Just like that time.

The instant Sjora stepped on Rinslet's head, Claire felt something snap in her mind.

She did not even have any recollection of chanting spirit magic -- the flames had been released involuntarily without conscious intent.

(To think that I actually had this kind of power...)

--Was this the blood inherited from the Elstein family who ruled over flames?

"...Did we win?"

Just as Claire's heavy breathing gradually calmed down and she prepared to stand up, in that very instant.

"...Owww!?"

From the flames came an attack of dark lightning, blowing Claire away.

Stepping upon the intensely burning flames, the witch stood up, still in the guise of the «Strongest Blade Dancer».

Apparently she had evaded a direct hit.

(...Is everything hopeless now?)

Collapsed on the ground, Claire moved her fingers slightly.

She did not even have the strength left to stand up. Her divine power for using her contracted spirit was also completely depleted.

"Foolish little hell cat, I really hate resistance--"

Ren Ashbell's face showed a sadistic smile.

"I must make you suffer completely. After all, there's plenty of time here."

"...Guh...!"

Claire clenched her trembling fingertips.

...Such chagrin. She could not accept this.

Claire could not accept how weak she was, unable to defeat even a fake like this witch.

She felt as though her admiration and precious memories from that day had all been trampled.

(I know very well, the blade dance of the true «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell--)

The scene she had witnessed three years ago.

To this day, it remained vividly carved in her memories.

(The true Ren Ashbell's blade dance is not something like this--)

Faster, stronger, more magnificent -- A blade dance that inspired courage in others.

Her facial profile showed such dignified beauty.

For some reason, the face in her memories began to superimpose with that of a certain youth familiar to Claire.

(Kamito...)

Footsteps could be heard approaching.

Claire's vision dimmed progressively as her consciousness faded.

She did not want to lose. Most absolutely, definitively, she did not want to lose--

The jet black blade of the demon sword flashed above her head.

In that instant--

"--Take your hand away from my comrades, Sjora Kahn!"

With an explosion of dazzling light, the hall was filled with pure white radiance.

"...Wha... Hmm...!?"

Blinded, Sjora covered her eyes.

(...This dazzling brightness comes from a spirit of light!?)

Crink -- Tumbling before Claire was a tiny fragment of spirit crystal.

(The one who uses these kinds of items is...)

Rubbing her eyes, Claire looked up.

Opening the door at the depths of the hall and appearing was--

"...Fianna!"

The princess glared at Sjora with her dusk-colored eyes.

Standing leisurely with arms akimbo, the imperial princess' dignified airs were grandly displayed.

"«Lost Queen», how did you escape from those shackles!?"

Ignoring Sjora who had recovered her vision, Fianna rushed over to Claire's side.

"Sorry, Claire, I--"

"Oh, there's no need to apologize. Teammates are supposed to help one another."

Claire averted eye contact as if a bit embarrassed.

Fianna clenched her fists tightly before her chest--

"...Thank you."

Softly, she murmured.

"Fools. Even if the fodder increases by one, it won't make any difference."

Sjora's mocking laugh resounded in the great hall.

"Guh..."

...Lamentably, Sjora's words could not be refuted.

Ellis and Rinslet were still unconscious.

Although Fianna's «Georgios» was a powerful spirit, it could only be used in coordination with the team. They currently lacked a power to singlehandedly overcome the unfavorable battle situation.

However.

"--Not necessarily."

Fianna stood up quietly.

"Thou, servant of the king of the child of man, knight and master swordsman—"

Immediately, she began to chant the releasing incantation for summoning her knight spirit.

"Thou shalt be my sword, thou shalt be my shield, with unlimited towering light, purify and exorcise those belonging to darkness--"

(...!?)

Claire forcefully looked up.

(No wait, this isn't a summoning... Could it be...!)

Centered around Fianna's right hand, strong gales began to swirl around.

On her head of dense black hair, a tiara manifested, shining with dazzling silver-white light.

Radiating glittering brilliance, a splendorous veil covered Fianna's entire body, giving off clear pure light.

Then--

--Its appellation reads thus, «Save the Queen»!"

Appearing on Fianna's right hand was--

An intricate and finely crafted rapier.

Rather than a knight's sword for combat, this was a ceremonial sword for performing ritual offerings.

"Elemental waffe..."

Claire stared with her ruby red eyes wide open.

"Claire, this is the form given to my thoughts and feelings."

Fianna turned around and smiled proudly.

"B-But, you using a sword..."

"Yes, indeed, I do not know how to wield a sword in combat."

Fianna nodded.

"This sword is used in this manner!"

The shining blade of the rapier was stabbed into the ground.

Instantly, light radiated from the tip of the rapier, tracing out a circular design akin to a magic circle.

"...This is?"

"The area within the circle is my «Territory». An absolutely impregnable castle, you see."

"...Hmph, and I thought it was going to be something special. How ridiculous."

Sjora Kahn jeered.

"Even if you can finally release your elemental waffe, do you really think you are able to defeat this «Strongest Blade Dancer»?"

With a swing of the «Vorpall Sword», a «Vorpall Blast» instantly shot towards Fianna.

"Fianna, dodge!"

However.

The jet black lightning was blocked by the defensive barrier of light as soon as it made contact with the «Territory».

"...Wha!?"

The «Strongest Blade Dancer»'s beautiful face was twisted with astonishment.

The «Territory» of light proceeded to expand, covering Ellis and Rinslet where they lay collapsed.

"...Y-Your Highness the imperial princess?"

"What on earth is this? What is going on...?"

Bathed in the gentle sacred light, the two girls awakened.

This light that filled the interior of the circle seemed to carry a holy attribute and healing effect.

Claire once again felt divine power coursing through her body.

When she summoned Scarlet, out appeared a hell cat enveloped in burning flames of conflagration that reached the ceiling.

"Amazing... This is Fianna's «Elemental Waffe»!"

Faced with Claire's exclamations of admiration, Fianna shook her head wryly.

"Unfortunately, this can't be maintained for long. So, you must take this opportunity now--"

"Understood -- «Flametongue»!"

Claire released Scarlet as her elemental waffe.

"W-We will also..."

"We can still fight!"

Ellis and Rinslet stood up and successively readied their respective elemental waffen.

"Ellis, you and I will act as the vanguard while Rinslet will provide cover support."

"Yes." "Fully understood!"

Nodding briefly in acknowledgement, the trio sprang into action at the same time.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Rinslet released an uncountable amount of arrows that were enough to cover the entire hall.

"Aha, you still don't realize this is futile?"

Sjora kicked a rock face and leaped, intending to sweep the arrows away with the demon sword of darkness.

"Too naive -- Blossoming without waiting for winter, «Ice Break»!"

In that instant, all the arrows shattered and scattered in front of Sjora.

"...A mere trick!"

The demon sword of darkness was frozen by the absolute zero temperature of the magical ice.

Taking advantage of the momentary delay in Sjora's movements--

"We're up, Ellis!"

Ellis and Claire instantly closed in.

Enveloped in wind at the same time, their movement speed was multiplied several fold.

"Absolute Blade Arts -- Third Form, Shadowmoon Waltz!"

Sjora leaped and swiftly rebounded off a rock face, raising the demon sword to slash at her two prey--

However.

"--Sorry, but I've already seen through that move already."

Claire struck her whip against the ground and used the resultant reaction force to jump backwards, evading the slash by the slimmest of margins. Missing its first attack, the sword's blade bounced off the stony ground. Seizing this opportunity, Ellis also retreated out of its attack range.

"What!?"

"After all, your swordsmanship--"

"I-Impossible. How could the «Strongest Blade Dancer»'s swordsmanship be seen through so easily!?"

Sjora once again used the demon sword to perform Absolute Blade Arts, however--

"--I know that motion very well!"

Similarly, Ellis predicted the sword's trajectory and evaded the slash.

"Guh... W-Why...!?"

Unmistakable signs of wavering appeared all over Sjora's face.

"Indeed, your swordsmanship is identical to the «Strongest Blade Dancer»'s. However--"

Claire infused Flametongue with maximum divine power.

Likewise, Ellis gathered a tempest at the spear tip of «Ray Hawk».

"Your sword is far inferior to the sword of the one we admire!"

Indeed. Sjora's swordsmanship faithfully replicated that of the «Strongest Blade Dancer».

Hence, it could be read and predicted.

For these two girls, Claire and Ellis, had always kept her blade dance firmly in memory.

Furthermore, Sjora's sword emulated Ren Ashbell's swordsmanship merely through the power of «Baldanders».

Whether in speed or power, the true Ren Ashbell was far superior.

As soon as they realized this fact--

"Handling you is a simple matter!"

"Y-You bitches -- BE GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONE!"

Abandoning the elegance of royalty, Sjora released a full-powered «Vorpall Blast».

"...!?"

Her target was not Claire and Ellis in front but Fianna behind them.

By this point in time, «Save the Queen»'s effects had ended.

Just as the attack was about to strike Fianna -- in that very instant, a figure rushed in front of her.

"Kamito!?" "Kamito-kun!" "Kamito--!" "Kamito-san!"

Claire, Fianna, Ellis and Rinslet -- Everyone yelled out that name all at once.

Wielding the «Demon Slayer», Kamito neutralized the jet black lightning attack with one hand.

"Hey there, Miss Imposter. Looks like you've been bullying these highborn ladies here."

Kamito's entire body emanated overwhelming wrath.

"Yah!"

This caused Sjora to involuntarily release a convulsive scream.

"You really must be paid back properly--"

His icy cold gaze focused firmly on Sjora.

"Let me demonstrate to you the swordsmanship of the «Strongest Blade Dancer»!"

Kamito took a great flying leap forward.

"...M-My «Baldanders» is the strongest spirit, I'm not going to lose to you!"

The witch in the guise of the «Strongest Blade Dancer» versus Kamito who wielded the «Demon Slayer» --

Began to clash in midair.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Destructive Form -- Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Four Consecutive Strikes!"

The witch unleashed the strongest anti-spirit sword technique against Kamito.

At the same time--

"Absolute Blade Arts, Destructive Form -- Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Fifteen Consecutive Strikes!"

The true authentic Strongest Blade Dancer performed a raging tidal wave of slashes, exploding all over Sjora Kahn's body.

Epilogue

Part 1

The long night of pandemonium finally gave way to dawn.

At sunrise, Kamito and his group returned victoriously, having rescued Fianna. After splitting the eight «Magic Stones» taken from Sjora equally with the «Four Gods», they cancelled their alliance.

"We have not given up on the match. After all, there's still one day remaining."

Shao of the «White Tiger» smiled cheerfully as she made preparations at the forest entrance.

"Prepare yourself for defeat, Kazehaya Kamito!"

"Yes, I pray there will be a next time for me to blade dance with you again, Shao."

"Ooh--, stop ignoring me!"

Smiling wryly as he watched Linfa's tearful wrath, Kamito and his team saw the two girls off.

"...Even though a lot had happened, they're actually not bad people at all."

"Yes. Although we are opponents here, as soon as the «Tempest» ends and we return to «Ragna Ys», let's try inviting them for tea then."

"Yeah, good idea, after all, we came to know them after going through so much together. Let's also invite Milla and Leonora as well."

"Y-You, are you really that intent on establishing intimate ties with girls from other countries?"

"Kamito-san truly has no scruples!"

Hearing Kamito's suggestion, Ellis and Rinslet pouted with dissatisfaction and objected.

"Kamito is such a perv. He had a kiss with that darkness spirit again."

"W-What!?"

Claire and the girls glared coldly at Kamito.

"E-Est!?"

"Kamito is such a perv."

...She even said it twice. Looks like Est was really miffed.

"Oh well, let's put that aside for now..."

Claire suddenly displayed a serious expression.

"--We have finally reached the last day of the «Tempest» event."

The only teams advancing to the finals are the top four in «Magic Stones». Currently, Team Scarlet was in possession of a total of fourteen «Magic Stones».

"Victory depends on our spoils on this final day."

"No problem. After all, Fianna is now able to use a powerful «Elemental Waffe»."

"We're looking forward to your performance, Fianna."

"Currently, it looks like its weakness is the relatively short active duration. I must find a way to overcome that."

A new member in the ranks of those capable to using elemental waffen, Fianna shrugged and responded.

In any case, this surely opened up more flexible tactics for the future.

"By the way, Kamito..."

Claire stared intently at Kamito's face.

"...Hmm?"

"Yesterday when you defeated Sjora, you said something like the following: 'Let me demonstrate to you the swordsmanship of the «Strongest Blade Dancer»!' --What did you mean by that?"

"..."

"Kamito?"

"T-That? Umm, I guess it was the wrong choice of words or something..."

Kamito avoided eye contact.

"O-Oh right, if memory serves me correctly, it's my turn to make breakfast!"

Immediately, he fled as quickly as flying.

"Arggggh, hey wait~!"

Kamito could hear the cracking of a whip from behind.

Part 2

Leaving the forest, just as everyone was about to return to their own tent--

"Hey Claire."

Fianna called to stop Claire.

"What's the matter?"

Claire turned around with a surprised expression.

"About the matter we discussed yesterday in the forest--"

"...!?"

Fianna smiled mischievously while Claire went red in the face.

"Y-You, y-you are referring to what!?"

"I still haven't heard a clear answer from you... Regarding Kamito-kun, how do you feel about him, Claire?"

"Uh, ah... How I feel about him, o-o-f course there's nothing..."

Despite her usual overbearing attitude, Claire was now in an adorable state of panic.

Tempted by a bullying impulse, Fianna asked--

"You love him? Or you hate him?"

"I-I don't hate him, okay... Hey, what is this, why are there only two choices!?"

"Just so you know, I want to smooch with Kamito-kun♪"

"Fuaah, y-you, what are you talking about? You perverted princess, a-are you retarded!?"

Blushing to her ears, Claire ran as if fleeing for dear life.

"...How dishonest."

Alone in the forest, Fianna shrugged involuntarily. Then she clenched her fist tightly before her chest.

(--I should keep that particular incident hidden in my heart for now.)

If Claire were to find out that girl's true identity, she would definitely become unable to fight.

Even if she would inevitably find out the truth one day.

Looking up at the cloudless sky of Astral Zero--

"...Rubia-sama."

Fianna called out her name softly.

Afterword

--Let me demonstrate to you the swordsmanship of the «Strongest Blade Dancer»!

Thank you for your patience, I am Shimizu. This time, I bring to everyone Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance's seventh installment, "The Strongest Blade Dancer" where love and battle developments are advancing rapidly!

Going all out in a full offensive strike, «Team Scarlet» had defeated the strongest enemy, Nepenthes Lore. However, Kamito's usage of the «Strongest Blade Dancer»'s swordsmanship during the battle began to arouse suspicions in Claire and the girls. "--Are you trying to hide something from us?"

In this situation, for the sake of acquiring the «Darkness Queen», the Alphas Theocracy's «Demon Caster» schemed in secret to manipulate the Quina Empire's powerful «Four Gods» team who issued what appeared to be a declaration of war to Kamito's team.

Fianna, troubled over her own lack of power. And the leader of «Team Inferno» who finally revealed her true identity.

In addition, there are the feelings the young maidens invested in the winner of three years ago, the «Strongest Blade Dancer» --

Continuing from Volume 6, this volume also delivers plenty of combat scenes!

Next, let me announce some major news. Starting in early summer of 2012, Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance's manga adaptation will start serializing in Monthly Comic Alive! (scatters petals in the air♪)

In charge of illustrating the manga will be Hyoujyu Issei-sensei who did the manga for MM. On the left here is the illustration for the serialization announcement. All the characters are so cute and cool looking here. I'm really looking forward to Hyoujyu-sensei's renderings of the intense battle scenes!

コミカライズ新連載!!

精霊使の剣舞

ブレイドダンス



月刊コミックアライブにて
2012年初夏より連載開始!!

ひょう じゅ いつ せい
[漫画] 氷樹一世

し みず ゆう
[原作] 志瑞祐

さくら
[キャラクター原案] 桜はんぺん

Next we have the usual acknowledgements. First of all, let me express my utmost thanks to Sakura Hanpei-sensei who brought to everyone these beautiful illustrations once again. Ren Ashbell on the cover is truly too adorable. It's making something awaken in my heart like the birth of a mini-universe.

Next I would like to express my sincere thanks to the super editor, Shouji-sama, who remains bravely supportive of my work even if it might flag him as a surveillance target by the state. (*If he starts wearing leopard print clothing, I'm sure he really will be questioned on what his job really is.)

Of course, the greatest thanks of all goes to all the readers who have supported this series.

I am truly thankful for the readers who have returned the survey and offered words of encouragement. Sakura Hanpen-sensei and I are overjoyed. Compared to the past popularity polls, the darkness spirit Restia who appeared in Volume 6 has exploded in popularity. Currently, the two great spirit supporter factions of Est and Restia are battling intensely for the top spot on the popularity ranking. Ladies of the Academy, please try your best!

--Well then, let's meet again in the eighth and next installment, "The Night Before the Finale (Fake)"!

Shimizu Yuu, April 2012

Illustrator's Afterword

Welcome to newcomers and welcome back to everyone else, I am Sakura Hanpen!

This time, Kamito finally makes his appearance on the cover!

Even I was completely surprised by the unexpected cover!

I had been worrying about whether I would be able to depict the kind of mood worthy of everyone's admiration.

But actually, this volume is more about the story of Fianna-chan's growth.

The content is really interesting.

Personally, I think the critical member in battle is actually Fianna-chan--

Although I already considered its possibility early on, I never expected the raising of such an avant-garde flag! I'm really looking forward to it... So cool and stylish...

I really want to see the next volume as soon as possible... (Totally became a reader)

Shimizu-sensei... I really want to read the stories about the various characters...

So, with these personal hopes delivered to Shimizu-sensei, this volume reaches its conclusion!

Well then, let's meet again next volume ~ (´ω`)ノシ...

Thank you all for reading!

■初めまして、またはお久しぶりです桜はんぺんです！
なんと、今回とうとうカミトくんが…！表紙に！
まさかの表紙で私もびっくりでした！
ちゃんとみんなが懂れるような雰囲気にしたのか心配です…。

でも実は今回フィアナちゃんの成長ストーリーでしたね。
すごく読んで楽しかったです。
個人的に戦闘の要はフィアナちゃんなんだろうなーと
思っていたのですがまさかの前衛フラグ！期待です…カッコいい…

次回も早く読みたいです…（完全読者側）
志瑞先生…みんなのキャラの個別ストーリーが読みたいです…

と、個人的な要望を志瑞先生に飛ばしながら今回は終わります！

それでは、また次巻でお会いしましょう～（´ω`）
手にとって頂いてありがとうございました！

2012.xx
桜はんぺん

あとがき

男の子と
なつちゃん
スカーレット
ちゃん！！

お世話になりました!!
志瑞先生、庄司さん
ミニキャラ：うめだ夏乃ちゃん
ヒルトルさん
ありがとうございます!

References

1. ↑ Kirin(麒麟): a mythical hooved Chinese chimerical creature known throughout various East Asian cultures, sometimes called the Chinese unicorn, also known as a son of the dragon, and brings good luck.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qilin>
2. ↑ Baldanders: Also known as the Soon-Another, a creature of Germanic literary myth that features protean properties.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baldanders>

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Illustrator : Sakura Hanpen

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